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GREEK FIRE: CLASSICAL VISIONS OF SEX AND VIOLENCE IN  
CONTEMPORARY IRISH LITERATURE

By

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Bachelor of Arts  
West Virginia University, 2000

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*Greek Fire: Classical Visions of Sex and Violence in Contemporary Irish Literature*  
by Steven Warren McCarty  
Thesis Abstract

The literatures of the classical world have played an important part in the shaping of English literature; the impact upon Irish culture has been no less profound. In contemporary Irish poetry and drama, the dominant strain found is that writers are using the classics as a lens through which to view the oppressive and taboo themes of violence and sex in modern life. The result is often a deliberate inversion of gender roles, the construction and assertion of peace being a feminine principle that is placed in a primary position instead of more violent masculine attitudes. These authors work from within this binary representation of a patriarchal order to demonstrate its ineffectiveness in both domestic and political terms, but they perform this criticism through the medium of the classics in order to gain a more objective vantage point. This is not simple neo-classicism, but rather a method to expand imaginative possibilities in modern material.

The authors included in this study employ the classics toward political and domestic peace, but each in their unique way. Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley explore the feminine peace from within the patriarchy, creating some form of hope against the surrounding violence of their society. Mary O'Malley, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, and Eavan Boland approach the dominant political and domestic structure from without, asserting not only feminine peace, but female sexuality and gender roles as well. Frank McGuinness is the most progressive author of the survey, working freely from both the feminine and male perspectives, yet still adhering to an abhorrence of masculine arrogance. The objective of these poems and plays is not to hold the world of ancient Greece and Rome as shining examples of how a society should be, but to explore ancestral musing on all that is visceral and human. Rather than becoming lost in language segregated from experience, they use the Greeks and Romans as "symbols adequate to our predicament."

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## Introduction

The literatures of the classical world have played an important part in the shaping of English literature; the impact upon Irish culture has been no less profound. In his book *Ireland and the Classical Tradition*, W.B. Stanford documents the long history of Greek and Roman civilization's influence upon the Irish. Recent critics (such as Elizabeth Cullingford) have documented more specific employment of classical themes and images by modern Irish writers, but fail to explain fully how and why authors choose to use these specific tropes. In contemporary Irish literature, the dominant strain found is that writers are using the classics as a lens through which to view with the oppressive and taboo themes of violence and sex in modern life. The result is often a deliberate inversion of gender roles, the construction and assertion of a peaceful feminine principle in a primary position instead of violent masculine attitudes. These authors work from within this binary representation of a patriarchal order to demonstrate its ineffectiveness in both domestic and political terms, but they perform this criticism through the lens of the classics in order to gain a more objective vantage point.

While this study relies largely on a gender-based critical approach, it is merely a base from which to expand to further discussions on the subject. Gender roles are ultimately patterns of dominance and submission, independent of a person's actual sex. The implications of this are palpably evident within post-colonial (and some would argue, colonial) Ireland. Much print has been given over to representations of

Britain as a male and Ireland as a feminine presence. What has been largely overlooked is the interconnectedness of political and gender conflict in contemporary Ireland. For example, Cullingford identifies the political implications of Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy*, but ignores the gender aspects, when in fact they are inextricably linked. Erin may have its several female manifestations, but Irish society as a whole is patriarchal and Roman Catholic (as if one could survive without the other). Roman Catholicism's presence is just as reliant on a patriarchal order and gender dichotomy as Britain and Ulster. This is a current that runs true even today, with the Vatican releasing an anachronistic diatribe against feminism and the equality of the sexes. Protestants in Northern Ireland suffer equally from the patriarchal society, because Unionists and Nationalists insist on masculine, and often sexist, codes of conduct to maintain political status, and feminine empathy and peace is caught in the crossfire. Violence is the instrument with which to maintain the status quo of power, both politically and domestically.

This violence has been pervasive in Irish discourse since the most recent outbreak of the "Troubles" in the late 1960s; the attempt to discover methods of confronting that violence artistically is older than the Republic of Ireland itself. The images of car bombs and heaped bodies on the evening news confronted the poet, playwright, and novelist with a very peculiar problem: how does one deal with violence in literature without becoming ensnared in the morass of contemporary politics? And how does one address the issue of gender roles through artistic representation without appearing a militant feminist? An answer was provided by Yeats fifty years earlier, that the goal should be to find "befitting emblems of

adversity.”<sup>1</sup> The difficulty is in finding emblems that are neutral (so as not to convey a political affiliation) yet disturbingly powerful.

What does this have to do with the classics? Earlier manifestations of Hellenism and neo-classicism in English literature have often employed the Greeks and Romans as a veil for politics or to create a bond between the world of the ancient Mediterranean and the writer’s own aesthetic goals, both with an obsequious nod to the Classical tradition as an ideal society that should be emulated by a corrupt contemporary society. In the opening decades of the twentieth century, there was a slow but severe shift away from the unquestioning admiration of the Greeks and Romans. In terms of sexual applications, the classics have certainly been called upon before, but with the purpose of refuting sexual mores. Oscar Wilde and the Uranians employed the classics to explore homosexuality in a “safe space,” but their advocacy of the Romans and Greeks had negative consequences for the classics. In the dock speech at his infamous indecency trial, Wilde appealed to the classics as a justification for homosexual love.<sup>2</sup> The upshot of this was a view that school children could be corrupted by classical influences. This effect was so enduring that Stanford even makes an apology for the virtue of the classics in his (somewhat anachronistic) 1976 study, even offering an example of a Hellenist of the period (John Sullivan, although educated at Trinity instead of Oxford) becoming a priest.<sup>3</sup>

William Butler Yeats also turned to the Greeks and Romans after early experiments with Irish mythology. He typically used them to support his personal idea of history and aesthetics as propounded in *A Vision*. For example, he uses the myth of Leda and Zeus to represent the beginning of a historical cycle that would end

with another god-human offspring, and he cites Oedipus as the "central figure of Greek mythology."<sup>4</sup> He also used the classics to confront contemporary sexual mores, or more specifically, to confront the conservative government that developed in the early years of the Irish Republic. Earlier in his career, Yeats campaigned extensively for an Irish production of *Oedipus Rex*, but the Lord Chamberlain censored the play for its incestuous content. He lost interest after the ban was lifted, but the effort was revived for an initial staging in 1926, probably more for adding kindling to the discussion of censorship laws in the new republic than any artistic endeavor.<sup>5</sup>

Joyce was ambivalent at best towards Hellenism, making the most prominent representative of Greek thought and concepts the usurper Buck Mulligan; he considered Hellenism a "European appendicitis."<sup>6</sup> The basis for this strain (stain?) of Hellenism in Ireland can be found in the works of George Moore (with more reverence) and Buck's real-life prototype, Oliver St. John Gogarty. However, Joyce also had positive leanings towards the Greeks (other than using the *Odyssey* as a framework for his magnum opus). It was a popular assertion of the early twentieth century that Ireland was founded by Phoenicians; even James Joyce gave credence (sometimes tongue-in-cheek, sometimes seriously) to this theory and had his own evidence that Gaelic was a derivative of Semitic languages outside of the Indo-European pale.<sup>7</sup> The evidence of this theory has not been definitive, but the scientific fact is not as important as the power of image in popular culture.

Joyce particularly abhorred the violence of Odysseus, and considered his slaughter of the suitors as an act that was particularly "unUlyssean."<sup>8</sup> Although the years of *Ulysses*' composition were more violent (World War I) than any time during

the Troubles, Joyce chose to eschew violence for a more pacifist mode, as in Bloom's dismissal of the suitors in the "Ithaca" chapter.<sup>9</sup> His method of coping with modern violence was not to apply classical bloodshed, but to avoid it altogether.

The next generation that followed Yeats and Joyce included counter-revivalists like Patrick Kavanagh and Austin Clarke, who eliminated the heroes and legends of Irish literature as proper emblems, because their employment would arouse suspicions of authenticity. Kavanagh drew from Joyce as his prototype in an "Irish" version of the Classics, quite obvious from several laudatory poems about *Ulysses* and citation of it as his "second-favorite book."<sup>10</sup> He sought to find the Greek in the Irish, or more specifically, the epic in the pedestrian. Kavanagh also applied Greek and Roman mythology in dealing with one of his most recurring subjects, the prudish Irish attitude toward sex, as in his "Pygmalion," where he compares a frigid Irish lass to Ovid's statue.<sup>11</sup>

If Kavanagh is the literary descendent of Joyce, then it would be appropriate to classify Clarke as corresponding to Yeats, employing the western tradition to deal with issues that are both politically and sexually charged. Clarke's later poetry increasingly used the classics, culminating in his long poem "Tiresias," in which he uses the blind prophet as a vehicle to extend the Irish *aisling* tradition, an "Irish genre of eroticized nationalism and politicized eroticism."<sup>12</sup> The poems from these years represent a continuation of the celebration of sexuality specifically counter to the Catholic Church's position concerning sex; copulation is not a vulgar and necessary evil, but a transcendental moment of human relationships that is essentially an art form. Greek

and Roman allusions added force to this line of thought, revealing the promiscuity of revered cultures.

The poets of the last quarter of the twentieth century represent a convergence of these two lines of thought that have descended from Joyce and Yeats. They make a Joycean effort at transforming the Greeks into Irishmen; however, they also utilize an aspect of the classics that Joyce found particularly disgusting: violence. And like Yeats and Clarke, they use the Greeks and Romans as a trope to confront the formerly (and currently) taboo subject (among Hellenists and neo-Classicists) of sex, to confront gender roles and political restrictions.

My selection of authors for this study is necessarily narrow; they are representative of the general trends in the literature, and utilize the classics more than other writers of equal stature. I have chosen five poets and one playwright not necessarily as a prejudice against prose, but that art form has not employed the classics to any large extent, certainly not enough to be included in a brief survey. Also, I have organized these authors chronologically according to their respective ages. Frank McGuinness's *Carthaginians* appears three years before Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* and contains more progressive gender roles than Heaney contributes in his play and later poetry. However, because McGuinness was born twelve years after the Nobel laureate, I consider him as being influenced by a different generational attitude, if not of a different generation altogether.

Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley have only turned to the classics relatively late in their careers, although both have small manifestations throughout their oeuvre; whether this is a more conservative reaction of a mature poet is



unimportant to our discussion, but it is interesting to note the gravitation towards the classics as a poet ages. These two poets employ the Greeks largely to deal with the surrounding violence of their society, and the hope for the future after the IRA ceasefire of 1994. Heaney had brief moments of Hellenism in his early career, such as the “wily Greeks” of “Whatever You Say Say Nothing,”<sup>13</sup> but it wasn’t until 1990 and the performance and publication of *The Cure at Troy* that his Greek impulse began in earnest. He followed that with a poetic sequence based on Aeschylus’s play *Agamemnon*, “Mycenae Lookout,” a poem that Helen Vendler has acknowledged as “the emotional centerpiece” of the collection.<sup>14</sup> In the “Sonnets from Hellas” sequence in *Electric Light*, Heaney attempts to fuse ancient and modern Greece with contemporary Ireland, with the result of the poet claiming the classical past for modern Erin. Most recently, he has again created another “version” of Sophocles, this time a recapitulation of *Antigone*, *Burial at Thebes*, another attempt at linking an old theme to a new meter and context.

Michael Longley also began to appropriate the Greeks for his poetic purposes in the early 1990s, beginning with the publication of *Gorse Fires*. A sequence concerning the travels of Odysseus (now becoming a standard theme in Irish literature) is scattered throughout the collection. Most of the pieces depict a very generous and familial man, which makes the ultimate poem “The Butchers,” all the more astonishing for the contrasted spirit. In his next volume, *The Ghost Orchid*, Longley draws from a wide variety of classical figures and philosophers, both Greek and Roman. Themes range from the highly sexualized tale of Arachne in

“Spiderwoman” to the story of Achilles and Priam in “Ceasefire,” which has obvious connections with the IRA ceasefire that was signed the year preceding his collection.

Following the chapter on Heaney and Longley, I have grouped together three very strong female poets: Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, Mary O’Malley, and Eavan Boland. Ni Dhomhnaill has made a career out of reworking Irish myths and legends into a new feminine context. In her latest collection in English, *The Water Horse*, she also pitches her talents in the camp of classical mythology. She recreates the muse as masculine (as will O’Malley and Boland), transforms sexual power politics, and addresses the madness of the sectarian violence all through her very unique lens of a new feminist mythology.

Two of Mary O’Malley’s collections, *The Knife in the Wave* and *Asylum Road*, do not deal extensively in the classics, but offer an interesting study for what topics are offered. In two poems from *The Knife in the Wave*, she renews the myth of Leda and Zeus, sifting the god’s victim through the various filters of Catholicism and Ireland. What is unique in these poems is not only her repositioning of Leda, but also her revision of Yeats’s version of the tale in all of its glorious absurdity. My three selections from *Asylum Road* place O’Malley into the emerging new feminist mythology, taking on the figures of the muse, Pygmalion, and Ceres. The general theme of these is female empowerment.

Eavan Boland has been utilizing the symbols of gods and muses ever since her poetic career began in the early 1970s. In many ways, she is both the complement and the foil to Seamus Heaney’s work of the same nature. Unlike “famous” Seamus, she did not take a desultory path through Northern European roots to reach the classics. In

her theory of reading female myths as coded history, it suits Boland better to uproot myth at its very sources in western tradition. She uses these myths as tropes for violence (both domestic and political) and the subjugation and fear under this terror of rape and sword. Boland's agenda of usurping the male role in history (or perhaps more appropriately, revealing the female role), attacks the usual target; in terms of domestic and sexual violence, she employs the obvious role of Daphne in her escape from the amorous affections of Apollo. Her strongest sequences arise from several poems that surround the myth of Ceres and Persephone. While this is not novel in its own respect (i.e., Mary O'Malley), her treatment of the myth as a very deep and moving experience of the domestic separation of mother and daughter gives her work important gender significance.

Finally, I treat the work of Frank McGuinness as the most progressive element of the Irish modernization of Greece and Rome with respect to coping with contemporary violence and gender bias. McGuinness has admitted that the violent situation in Northern Ireland has had an immeasurable impact on his writing: "It is there in everything I write, especially when it does not seem to be there [an encouraging idea for critics]....How could I not write about the war, the peace?"<sup>15</sup> He is equally committed to leveling the gender hierarchy, challenging his audience to reassess what we consider "masculine" and "feminine," acknowledging "All my plays are studies of sexual politics in a way."<sup>16</sup> These two major themes having been established, I have chosen two of his plays for their application of classics to his preoccupations, *Carthaginians* and *Electra*. The former production followed the phenomenal success of McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Toward*

*the Somme*, and performed a similar trick of incorporating historical events (or lore) into his play as a method of coping with the bullets and bombs of modern Northern Ireland. His central character is Dido, "queen of Derry," a young gay male who serves as a go-between for the "Carthaginians" camped inside of a cemetery and contemporary Derry. McGuinness does not only use the figure of Dido to negotiate gender spaces within the play, but also makes certain characters more masculine and more feminine according to their roles. The play's back story is "Bloody Sunday," an event when thirteen protesters were shot and killed in Derry by British Paratroopers. So while McGuinness is coping with the violence of the external world in *Carthaginians*, internally he is renegotiating the gender prejudices of the characters, and by consequence Irish arts and society. His next foray into Greek culture involves a project that Seamus Heaney has made en vogue for Irish poets, a "version" of an existing poem or play. In his remake of Sophocles' *Electra*, McGuinness once again touches upon the themes of the Troubles and gender roles. *Electra* serves as one of the classic examples of a revenge tragedy, and the impotence of the central character to commit the act because of her sex once again raises the topic of assigned roles within a society.

It is important to note that when I speak of the re-employment of the classics, or neo-Classicism and Hellenism, I do not mean the simple reapplication of the themes from an ancient western civilization. All of the authors discussed in this study follow Joyce (both in the chronological sense and as a mentor). As Richard Ellmann said of *Ulysses*, "[Joyce] looked into the events of the Odyssey for that core of humanistic significance which would awaken his imagination and impart an epic loftiness to his

modern material.”<sup>17</sup> Although these authors are decidedly postmodern (especially McGuinness), the song remains the same. The objective of these poems and plays is not to hold the world of ancient Greece and Rome as shining examples of how a society should be, but to explore ancestral musings on all that is visceral and human, or as Richard Kearney aptly put it, “We must never cease to keep our mythological images in dialogue with history; because once we do we fossilize. That is why we will go on telling stories, inventing and re-inventing myths, until we have brought history home to itself.”<sup>18</sup> Rather than becoming lost in language segregated from experience, they use the Greeks and Romans as “symbols adequate to our predicament.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Yeats, William Butler. *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose*. Ed. James Pethica (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000), 88.

<sup>2</sup> Dowling, Linda. *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Stanford, W.B. *Ireland and the Classical Tradition*. (Dublin: Allen Figgis & Company Ltd., 1976), 239-240.

<sup>4</sup> Arkins, Brian. *Builders of My Soul: Greek and Roman Themes in Yeats*. (Savage, MD: Barnes and Noble Books, 1990), 126.

<sup>5</sup> Clark, David R. and James B. McGuire. "Yeats Writes His Own Version." *W.B. Yeats: The Writing of Sophocles' King Oedipus*. By William Butler Yeats. (Philadelphia: The Americal Philosophical Society, 1989), 32-33.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Stanford. *Tradition*, 104.

<sup>7</sup> Cullingford, Elizabeth Butler. *Ireland's Others: Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Popular Culture*. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), 132.

<sup>8</sup> Budgen, Frank. *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), 256.

<sup>9</sup> Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Ed. Hans Walter Gabler. (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 601-602.

<sup>10</sup> Warner, Alan. *Clay is the Word: Patrick Kavanagh 1904-1967*. (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1973), 93-94.

<sup>11</sup> Kavanagh, Patrick. *Collected Poems*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1964), 31

<sup>12</sup> Madden, Ed. "Austin Clarke's 'Tiresias' and the Aisling Tradition." *The South Carolina Review*. (32:1), 60.

<sup>13</sup> Heaney, Seamus. *North*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 54

<sup>14</sup> Vendler, Helen. *Seamus Heaney*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 156.

<sup>15</sup> quoted in Foley, Imelda. *The Girls in the Big Picture: Gender in Contemporary Ulster Theater*. (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 2003), 108.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Foley. *Big Picture*, 140.

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<sup>17</sup> Ellmann, Richard. "Ulysses and the Odyssey." *English Studies*. (1962:3), 423.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Schneider, Ulrich. "Staging History in Contemporary Anglo-Irish Drama: Brian Friel and Frank McGuinness." *The Crows Behind the Plough: History and Violence in Anglo-Irish Poetry and Drama*. Ed. Geert Lernout. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991), 56.

<sup>19</sup> Heaney, Seamus. *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978*. (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1980), 56

"No more piteous than Odysseus's tears":

Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Politics & Gender

I.

Some critics have accused Seamus Heaney of "saying nothing," playing upon the culture of silence that he depicts in "Whatever You Say Say Nothing."<sup>1</sup> Desmond Fennell asserts that "Heaney says nothing about irrational violence, and all he suggests about it, generically, is that it is evil and sad: an insight that we hardly need to read poetry for."<sup>2</sup> The response of Heaney's poetry to this interrogation is that if the incivility of violence was so palpable, then Northern Ireland would not have been plagued by it for the last quarter of a century. Heaney does not "weigh in" with respect to Fennell's qualifications precisely because he does not want to be reappropriated for political purposes, avoiding what happened with the ex post facto interpretation of "Requiem for the Croppies."<sup>3</sup> The result is not so much a search for identity, but for a lens (or in Yeatsian terms, a mask) through which to view the Troubles and the current post-colonial (or colonial, depending upon whom you ask) situation in Northern Ireland.

If Heaney is ambiguous about political affiliation, he is more direct about the gender roles that are implicitly involved in the conflict, evident in his statement that in Northern Ireland "the enmity can be viewed as a struggle between the devotees of a god and a goddess. There is an indigenous territorial numen, a tutelary of the whole island, call her Mother Ireland, Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the poor old woman, the Shan



Van Vocht, whatever; and her sovereignty has been temporarily usurped or infringed by a new male cult whose founding fathers were Cromwell, William of Orange and Edward Carson, and whose godhead is incarnate in a rex or caesar resident in a palace in London.”<sup>4</sup> Clearly he wants to expurgate the male presence, or at least bring a type of recognition to its oppression. However, his depiction of Ireland as a female is itself an entirely masculine conception, similar to classical constructions of the Muse, projecting male ideas of power and reclamation. Heaney uses this female image throughout his poetry, a female body that Patricia Coughlan recognizes as “a woman who dooms, destroys, puzzles and encompasses the man, but also assists him to his self discovery: the mother stereotype, but merged intriguingly with the spouse.”<sup>5</sup> Coughlan is speaking of his earlier poetry from *North* and the representations of the Northern European tradition, but at times it applies equally to his application of Greek tradition to women. However, his more mature poems do modify his position slightly; rather than gazing at the mutilated female body (as in *North*), he seeks a reconciliation through a peace represented as feminine (achieved through mutual understanding and empathy rather than violence).

Early in his career, Heaney used Greek myth and legend primarily to shore up his idea of an Irish tradition, or more narrowly, a Belfast Irish tradition. This poetry seems to be digging into the past in order to discover a foothold on which to erect the present. The initial indication of this trend appeared at the end of his first collection of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*. In “Personal Helicon,”<sup>6</sup> Heaney depicts a palimpsest, a writing over of the Irish with Greek concepts, making a rural well into his personal Mount Helicon. In this instance, he uses Hellenic tradition to lend poetic credibility to

Northern Ireland by establishing a bond with his antecedents. Generally speaking, this is how Heaney employed classical references until *The Cure at Troy*, with some notable anomalies, such as the anti-colonial tone evident in "Antaeus" and "Hercules and Antaeus," and the comparison of the Northern Irish population to the twins that Leda bore after her rape by Zeus (along with a tongue-in-cheek reference to Yeats' "Leda and the Swan"), "one island-green, one royal blue."<sup>7</sup> Rather than an exclusive focus on the tropes of antiquity, Heaney's emblems of the 1970s and 1980s were of Northern European stock (*Door into the Dark* and *North*) and a Dantean vision of modern Ireland (portions of *Field Work*, but especially *Station Island*). It is with *The Cure of Troy* that Heaney has made nearly a full (and so far permanent) shift into Greek mode.

In his version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, Heaney dwells on the less appealing aspects of Ulysses as well, but his purpose is to be redeemed from old feuds, "converting a scene of violent rupture into one that offers the possibility for renewal."<sup>8</sup> Four years before the IRA cease-fire, *The Cure at Troy* recounts the story of Philoctetes being marooned on the island of Lemnos by Odysseus and company en route to Troy because of a festering wounded foot. After the Greeks learn that the only way to win the war is through the use of Philoctetes' bow, Odysseus sails back with Neoptolemus to gain the weapon through deception. After much inner turmoil, Neoptolemus' pragmatism prevails, and at the end we witness the beginning of the cure at Troy. Even a cursory reading of Heaney's version quickly reveals the parallels between Sophocles' play and the current situation in Northern Ireland:

Philoctetes.

Hercules.

Odysseus.  
Heroes. Victims. Gods and human beings.  
All throwing shapes, every one of them  
Convinced he's in the right, all of them glad  
To repeat themselves and their every last mistake,  
No matter what.<sup>9</sup>

The strongest reading is of the deceptive Odysseus as an Ulsterman, Neoptolemus as British, and Philoctetes as a Northern Catholic. The parable structure of the play certainly leaves this open to interpretation, but it is the least problematic. Although Heaney's creation has been largely ignored by critics in comparison with some of his other works, what transpires is a powerful political drama that is intensified by the use of a Grecian backdrop.

Strict designations of parallels are not as important as an examination of the language used in the play. The Greeks speak the language of the Troubles, as in the Chorus' examination of Philoctetes: "This is a danger man. / That shouting's desperate and it's violent / He sounds provoked. He maybe saw the boat."<sup>10</sup> The last line is nearly comedy in nervous laughter with consideration to Ireland's colonized past and the visions of British ships in Erin's harbors. This even ties back into *Death of a Naturalist* and the poem "For the Commander of the Eliza," where the starving men of the Great Famine plead in Gaelic for food from a small row boat to the commander of a British patrol vessel.<sup>11</sup> If the language parallels here are not palpable enough, Heaney gives us a line that seems to arrive straight from the lips of the Provisional IRA: "Don't treat me / like an untouchable. What I am / Is what I was made into by the traitors."<sup>12</sup> Extending upon the methods he used in *An Open Letter*, the poet uses *The Cure at Troy* as a mouthpiece to deal with sensitive issues. The "cure" afforded to Philoctetes is only the healing embedded in the story; on a larger scale is the cure "in

its rich resonance of restoring health, purifying, and caring spiritually—afforded by poetry itself.”<sup>13</sup>

However, there is something disturbing about this compromised peace within *The Cure at Troy*. Odysseus is neither punished nor edified by this episode of peace brokering. Philoctetes is the only person submitting his pride, and Neoptolemus is the only character that gains transcendental knowledge from the experience. While it can be argued that Heaney is merely working from the template that Sophocles provided, the Irish bard was not loathe to modify elsewhere, making this line of thinking tenuous ground. I propose that Philoctetes, as the wounded and emasculated male, is the sole feminine character of the play, and Heaney is making a conscious choice by allowing his “heroine” to triumph in order to demonstrate the possibility of a feminine peace.

The dramatis personae of *The Cure at Troy* are reminiscent of Frank McGuinness’s *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Toward the Somme*: an isolated cast of male soldiers. As McGuinness’s work creates a general homosocial atmosphere, Heaney’s emasculation focuses on one character. What plagues Philoctetes is a festering wound that will not heal, or more specifically a “cankered foot- / Or what had been a foot before it rotted / And ate itself with ulcers.”<sup>14</sup> This marks the beginning of Odysseus’s goal of projecting Philoctetes as female. His wound has connotations of a vagina, a “wound” that continues to bleed without hope of healing. This comparison extends beyond physical characteristics into Philoctetes’ psychological composition.

Odysseus continues his denigration of Philoctetes by describing the scene of his bemoaning his wound while the Troy expedition were paying homage at the altar,

"We couldn't even get peace at the altar / Without him breaking out in these howling fits, / And slabbering and cursing."<sup>15</sup> Philoctetes is displaying symptoms of the "wandering womb" syndrome, hysteria, an illness that is typically associated with women.

Later in the play there are various attempts to re-masculate Philoctetes, but with mixed results; the Chorus describes him as "just and dutiful."<sup>16</sup> As it continues, the reverse effect occurs and Philoctetes is made more feminine by the lines:

He crept round like an infant.  
He wept. And when he hunted  
For herbs to soothe the foot,  
The foot wept as he dragged it.  
His trail was blood and matter.  
But when an infant creeps  
And hurts himself and weeps,  
The helping hand is there.  
For Philoctetes, never:  
His echo was his neighbor.<sup>17</sup>

This association of Philoctetes dragging his "weeping" wound through the wilderness with an infant has connotations of an infant abandoned by its hysterical mother. He is feminine without fertility; his hysteria has been converted into a hysterectomy.

The final attempt to make Philoctetes macho ultimately fails; rather, it fails to make him masculine, but succeeds in the peace. As Neoptolemus offers to escape with Philoctetes, the wounded man offers to defend their flight from the Greeks with violence, seeing "Hercules's bow is miraculous / And will save us every time."<sup>18</sup> This is checked by the voice of Hercules (via the Chorus), who wants Philoctetes to reconcile himself with the Greeks and sail to Troy, where he will be cured. Upon Hercules's revelation, Philoctetes exclaims that "Something told me the channels were

going to open.”<sup>19</sup> His hysterectomy has been reversed and can now realize a fertile peace with even the likes of Odysseus.

Even though we depart the play with Philoctetes on his way to Troy to regain his manhood, he is still female (“wounded”). In the post-modern world of criticism, it is difficult to ignore the consequences of what occurs after *The Cure at Troy*: the Trojans were defeated and Troy was burned and colonized by the Greeks. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford argues that the play employs the “symbolic opposition between Greece and Troy to urge the paramilitaries to come in from the cold and work together and create a new political situation that will represent a moral victory over England.”<sup>20</sup> She is correct to a certain extent, but how much Heaney’s work represents a “moral victory over England” is debatable. At the time of the play’s composition, London was gravitating more towards Dublin than Stormont to work out a solution. For decades the “IRA had seen itself as engaged in an anti-colonial, anti-imperialist freedom struggle”;<sup>21</sup> now they had to seriously consider their strategies and who the “enemy” really was. This not only suspended the idea of ousting colonizers, but further alienated Loyalists. Regardless, the “cure” is the “healing between the Greeks, clearly identified as the IRA and the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary].”<sup>22</sup> Heaney does not complete the affirmation, but merely leads the audience to the moment of possibility.

Philoctetes’ reconciliation with Odysseus merely forms “the stepping-stones to upper air”;<sup>23</sup> the two men are far from mutual understanding, but they are closer to achieving a common goal. The interrogation of intertextual space has not been aided by Heaney’s comments: “I didn’t mean it to be triumphant—I meant it to be a

visionary possibility.”<sup>24</sup> The emphasis on “possibility” is a call for a more feminine peace; a “triumphant” play would necessarily be either fantasy or partisan, i.e., somebody would have to lose. The conclusion is not a matter of winning or losing, and this is how we should consider the role of Philoctetes; at the curtain’s closing, he has not fully transformed into the masculine ideal; instead, he has become what Leopold Bloom was a century earlier (or two millennia later, depending upon how one reckons the time), a new feminized male. He is a man that is able to compromise without violence, able to empathize with his enemies.

Heaney’s later foray into Hellenic tradition is drawn not from Homer or Sophocles, but from Aeschylus’s play *Agamemnon*. “Mycenae Lookout”<sup>25</sup> starts where the Greek began, at the end of the Trojan War. The protagonist is a minor character of the play, the Watchman, and his temperament is typical of previous Heaney poetry, expressing both “reluctance and complicity” in relation to the surrounding violence.<sup>26</sup> Similar to the narrator of “Punishment,”<sup>27</sup> the watchman is objectively involved: abhorring what he witnesses yet powerless (either voluntarily or involuntarily) to intervene. In “The Watchman’s War,” Heaney varies on a theme that is pervasive in his work, that of a poet’s role in a time of violence, or a soldier being absent from the fray:

I balanced between destiny and dread  
And saw it coming, clouds bloodshot with the red  
Of victory fires, the raw wound of that dawn  
Igniting and erupting, bearing down  
Like lava on a flowing population...<sup>28</sup>

These lines bear the mark of acknowledged complicity, the guilt of a contemplative mind. Much like Heaney, the Watchman does not refrain from describing the violence

of his times; he is disgusted by it, but is powerless in confronting it. Violence may be a means to victory, but he questions the cost of blood. Later in "His Dawn Vision,"<sup>29</sup> we see "Small crowds of people watching as a man / Jumped a fresh earth-wall and another ran / Amorously, it seemed, to strike him down," a scene that could easily have taken place in the streets of Derry or Belfast as much as Troy.

As in *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney deals with the violence and "betrayals" of modern Northern Ireland through the lens of Greek tradition. Also as in his version of *Philoctetes*, his retelling of Aeschylus involves a gendered vision of the violence. In "The Watchman's War" sequence, Clytemnestra's sexual betrayal of Agamemnon is equated with the sanguine effort of the king at Troy:

Up on my elbows, head back, shutting out  
The agony of Clytemnestra's love-shout  
That rose through the palace like the yell of troops  
Hurled by King Agamemnon from the ships.<sup>30</sup>

Although it initially appears that Heaney is denigrating female sexuality, he is actually preparing her for an unfeminine act of murder (an act that poses great difficulty for her daughter, Electra).

However, in the following poem "Cassandra," the poet returns to his old role of using the female body as an instrument of epiphany, refusing Cassandra a body of her own. Instead of "[assisting the male] to his self discovery,"<sup>31</sup> she aids the audience in an objective witnessing of the evils inherent in Mycenaean society. Violence (both political and domestic) is associated with the masculine: "King Agamem- / non's drum- / balled, old buck's / stride was back."<sup>32</sup> The poet ultimately does fulfill Coughlan's criticism, implicitly acknowledging that he uses the innocence of



Cassandra merely as a contrast to sharpen the focus of a terrible present, as in the Watchman's flower collecting in "His Dawn Vision":

The little violets' heads bowed on their stems,  
The pre-dawn gossamers, all dew and scrim  
And star-lace, it was more through them  
I felt the beating of the huge time-wound  
We lived inside.<sup>33</sup>

The Watchman is increasingly associated with the feminine, especially in his inability to act against the adulterous Aegisthus, which culminates in Agamemnon's murder.

The king does not die innocent; he is also responsible for sexual violence at the fall of Troy:

When the captains in the horse  
felt Helen's hand caress  
its wooden boards and belly  
they nearly rode each other.  
But in the end Troy's mothers  
bore the brunt in alley,  
bloodied cot and bed.<sup>34</sup>

It is in this penultimate section that the blood feud achieves equilibrium; Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon (aside from sexual motives with Aegisthus) in retribution for the deaths in Troy. Again, post-modern applications need to be suspended; in Greek tradition, Agamemnon was murdered in retribution for his sacrifice of Iphigenia, and his death set off further retaliatory killings that can only be defused by the intercession of Euminides and the gods. However, judging from the concluding poem of the sequence, Heaney declares the bloodshed finished.

In "His Reverie of Water," Heaney unearths a standard trope of the cleansing power of water and utilizes it for reconciliation and as a source of poetry:

And then this ladder of our own that ran  
deep into a well-shaft being sunk

in broad daylight, men puddling at the source  
through tawny mud, then coming back up  
deeper in themselves for having been there  
like discharged soldiers testing the safe ground,  
finders, keepers, seers of fresh water  
in the bountiful round mouths of iron pumps  
and gushing taps.<sup>35</sup>

Here is the marriage of the message of reconciliation in *The Cure at Troy* and the answer to the question of the poet's role in a turbulent society. Consciously or not, Heaney also transports us back to "Personal Helicon" and the Grecian well imagery found there. In the early poem, it was posited as mere theory, whereas in "His Reverie of Water" it discovers an actualizing force. Another parallel is quite apparent from the "Mossbawn" essay: "The horses came home to [the water pump] in those first lengthening evenings of spring, and in a single draught emptied one bucket and then another as the man pumped and pumped, the plunger slugging up and down, omphalos, omphalos, omphalos."<sup>36</sup> "Mycenae Lookout" then ends with the message of hope in the wake of the IRA ceasefire, but also with a scent of romantic sentimentality, longing for a time beyond the violence and an imagined space of reconciliation.

This peace lends itself to a gendered reading. Psychologically, the Watchman is returning to his point of origin. Consider the lines "Or rather that old lifeline leading up / and down from the Acropolis / to the well itself."<sup>37</sup> This "old lifeline" has connotations of the umbilical chord; the tired and bloodstained warriors ultimately return to the womb (represented by the dark, moist well) for cleansing and reconciliation; it is the place where "Greek met Greek."<sup>38</sup> It is here that peace is found for men, where the Watchman sees "men puddling at the source / through tawny mud,

then coming back up / deeper in themselves for having been there.”<sup>39</sup> As in *The Cure at Troy*, we witness a feminine peace, one that is purifying and peaceful. Helen Vendler says of the poem, “The sporadic breakdowns of the ceasefire do not invalidate the political closure it symbolized.” It does not symbolize political closure so much as political hope, noting the potential for peace rather than triumph. The conclusion is left open for political discourse and for future installments of the Greeks in Heaney’s work.

In his most recent volume of poetry, *Electric Light*, Heaney again devotes extensive attention to Hellas; this time it is an amalgamation of ancient Greece, modern Greece, and modern Ireland. The poet’s ultimate goal in the poetic sequence “Sonnets from Hellas” seems to be a consumption of Greek culture, to ingest and process it. He establishes the delicate balance between the three worlds in “Into Arcadia,” as he notes “a system of pipes and runnels of split reed / Known in Hellas, probably, since Hesiod.”<sup>40</sup> Further down the road he notices a goatherd that is “subsisting beyond eclogue and translation.”<sup>41</sup> Essentially he is merely giving name to what he has been doing since the beginning of his career, attempting to capture the human within his rural Irish experience and within Greek tradition, trying to give voice to a universal experience that defies words and translation.

After Heaney establishes this connection, he then proceeds to enact his theory in practice. “The Augean Stables” brings together the poet’s modern experience of viewing a bas-relief of Athene and Heracles, the past myth of Heracles cleaning the Augean stables, and the still current violence in Northern Ireland. It was during Heaney’s trip to Greece that he heard of a sectarian killing back home:

That we heard of Sean Brown's murder in the grounds  
Of Bellaghy GAA Club. And imagined  
Hose-water smashing hard back off the asphalt  
In the car park where his athlete's blood ran cold.<sup>42</sup>

If this pattern seems familiar, it is. This is strikingly akin to "Summer 1969" from

*North:*

While the Constabulary covered the mob  
Firing into the Falls, I was suffering  
Only the bullying sun of Madrid. [...]  
'Go back,' one said, 'try to touch the people.'  
Another conjured Lorca from his hill.<sup>43</sup>

Heaney is once again a collector of "emblems of adversity" from around the world.

Whether it is a bas-relief or Lorca, he is appropriating images from abroad; this latest work is another manifestation of his preoccupation with ancient Greek culture.

As the final poem of the sequence, "Desfina" not only resolves the literary problems presented in the previous five poems, but also completes other strains begun in earlier in Heaney's career. In *Death of a Naturalist*, he compared Mount Helicon to a well in Mossbawn; it is a paternal naming of the feminine, the paternal western tradition giving voice for a feminized Ireland. "Desfina" revises this previous position:

Mount Parnassus placid on the skyline:  
Slieve na mBard, Knock Filiocht, Ben Duan.  
We gaelicized new names for Poetry Hill  
As we wolfed down horta, tarama and houmos[.]<sup>44</sup>

Here the representative of the female island engages in an act of revising the western tradition; unlike "Personal Helicon," the land of wells takes precedence over the mountain. In the beginning of his career, Heaney projected the western male tradition upon feminine Ireland; in "Desfina," he takes the most fundamental male privilege,

i.e., "naming," and turns it over to the opposite sex, thus inverting typical gender roles. It is the culmination of his previous new feminine males in *The Cure at Troy* and "Mycenae Lookout." He reverses the post-colonial discourse of superior and subordinate; while Heaney may not produce a "female" vision of Ireland, he does engage gender roles in his work and the result is a new male that is sympathetic and empathetic to victims of political and domestic violence.

## II.

Michael Longley has always reflected the classics in one way or another throughout his career, in form if not in content; he even studied classics at university, and centered several poems upon classical themes in his first volume of poetry, *No Continuing City*, in 1969.<sup>45</sup> His utilization of Romans and Greeks became more frequent and intensified in the 1990s. Longley published *Gorse Fires* in 1991, which contained an interspersed sequence of poems that deals with the wanderings of the *Odyssey*. After finding the foundation of western literature to be a fitting "emblem of adversity," he continued to use classical images in *The Ghost Orchid* and beyond.

In *Gorse Fires*, Michael Longley dispersed a poetic sequence of seven poems concerning Odysseus throughout the collection. The overarching theme of this sequence is the wanderer's family, whether it is Laertes, Anticleia, or his faithful dog Argos. This motif of familial relations and responsibility is not novel in Longley's oeuvre. What is unique is how these members reflect the image of Odysseus and shape him into a seemingly compassionate figure. This does not appear to be the peripatetic warrior usually associated with the name.

“Homecoming”<sup>46</sup> is the opening poem of this sequence; it recounts the long-awaited arrival of Odysseus on the shores of Ithaca. What strikes us on the initial reading is the serenity of the scene, noting the presence of olive-branches and concluding with Odysseus in slumber. Longley uses a favorite device in this piece, a cataloguing of items:

At the harbour-head  
A long-leaved olive overshadows a shadowy cave  
Full of bullauns, basins hollowed out of stone, stone  
Jars for honey-bees, looms of stone on which are woven  
Sea-purplish things – also, inextinguishable springs  
And two ways in, one looking north where men descend  
While the other faces south, a footpath to the gods.<sup>47</sup>

The most prominent feature of this sequence is the sense of domesticity that surrounds it. Basins, jars, and looms are more befitting an Ithacan maid than a warring king.

Longley is establishing in reverse order what Heaney’s “Mycenae Lookout” accomplished (I use this reference loosely, considering that *The Spirit Level* was published five years after *Gorse Fires*); instead of being borne through violence to achieve a form of reconciliation within the womb, Odysseus’ origin is the point of origin, or rather the birth-canal language of “inextinguishable springs,” but this will ultimately be extinguished in the horrific acts of violence depicted in the “The Butchers.”

Odysseus is again identified with the domestic in “Tree-house,” a poem that retells Homer’s description of a bed that the hero had constructed for his wife. While he is engaged in the more “manly” activity of carpentry, the Ithacan king is also a home-builder (compared to the home-wreaking suitors) and creator of domestic furnishings. As Odysseus is at his most masculine, he is also most vulnerable: “She

believed at last in the master-craftsman, Odysseus, / And tangled like a child in the imaginary branches / Of the tree-house he had built, love poet."<sup>48</sup> Aside from being compared to a "love poet," he is also likened to a child. The warrior is emasculated by these images; rather, this poem adds another point from which to draw in creating a more feminine hero.

Longley tries to establish further the vulnerability of Odysseus in "Eurycleia," but performs the task in a cyclical order. This is the only poem of the *Odyssey* sequence where the poet directly links the mythic past to modern times. Eurycleia is the old servant who recognizes her lord by the scar on his leg inflicted by a boar. Longley eroticizes this event by having Eurycleia cry out, "You are my baby boy for sure and I didn't know you / until I had fondled my master's body all over."<sup>49</sup> Direct attention is focused on "fondled" and carries over into the second part of the poem:

I began like Odysseus by loving the wrong woman  
Who has disappeared among the skyscrapers of New York  
After wandering for thousands of years from Ithaca.  
She alone remembers the coppice, dense and overgrown,  
Where in a compost of dead leaves the boar conceals  
Its bristling spine and fire-red eyes and white tusks.<sup>50</sup>

The vulnerability of the speaker in this sequence projects weakness upon Odysseus; both men are victims of a form of penetration that leads to sexual recognition. They are sexually subordinated and attempt to mask this fact, Odysseus in removing his scar from the firelight and the anonymous speaker in burying the boar in a compost heap. It is a failed attempt at covering exposed femininity.

The two poems concerning Odysseus's parents, "Laertes" and "Anticleia," are as much autobiographical as indicative of any qualities of the protagonist. Each is preceded by a poem about Longley's father and mother, respectively. These poems

establish Odysseus' role as a son, and both convey a great sense of pathos for the wanderer. "Laertes" works very much in the same manner as several of Longley's previous works about his father, as well as several poems of Heaney's on the same subject ("A Phone Call"), by severing the stoic idea of restrained emotion and giving way to a feminine form of sorrow and joy. Upon seeing Laertes in his broken-down state, "Odysseus sobbed in the shade of a pear-tree for his father / So old and pathetic that all he wanted then and there / Was to kiss him and hug him and blurt out the whole story."<sup>51</sup> While Longley creates a masculine bond in "Laertes," he slowly begins to disassociate Odysseus from the feminine in "Anticleia." The king of Ithaca seeks his mother in Hades, but is denied a union with the female body. To summon the shades, Odysseus sacrifices "a ram and a black ewe."<sup>52</sup> This sacrifice is not enough to restore the flesh and sinews of Anticlea. The futility of this passage recalls Yeats's "Easter 1916" and Heaney's "Keeping Going." Thus separated from the female body, Odysseus makes a gradual turn towards masculine violence.

"Argos" is a poem about a man and his dog. It recounts the incident in the Odyssey when Odysseus's dog Argos has waited faithfully for his master for twenty years only to die from excitement upon his return. The poem has a certain pan-theism to it, cherishing the life of every bird and beast. It holds the penultimate position in the sequence, and these seemingly over-sentimental (very much like Old Yeller) lines are designed specifically for the purpose of creating a deep sympathy for the wanderer and his affinity with the reader:

[...]until like Odysseus  
We weep for Argos the dog, and for all those other dogs,  
For the rounding-up of hamsters, the panic of white mice  
And the deportation of one canary called Pepicek.<sup>53</sup>



By using the collective “we,” the poet links Odysseus not only to modern times, but to our own peculiarly human experience; like the Ithacan king, we too have suffered the loss of a family pet, thereby interweaving our fate with the protagonist. Here Longley is connecting the final link in Odysseus’s portrait as a sympathetic character, just before his feminine image is destroyed in “The Butchers.”

In his poem “The Butchers,” Longley chooses not to ignore Ulysses’ violent streak as Joyce did. This poem is very graphic in portraying “what seems like a scandalously gratuitous act of revenge,”<sup>54</sup> the hanging of Penelope’s unfaithful maids. It is important to note that the slaughter of the suitors has already been accomplished by the time that we engage the poem; the political murders are over, and now the Ithacan king turns toward domestic violence. By doing this, Longley is noting that the act of revenge has already been accomplished; what follows is rampant blood-lust. The poem systematically dismantles the character of Odysseus that Longley has so carefully constructed throughout the sequence:

Odysseus, spattered with muck and like a lion dripping blood  
From his chest and cheeks after devouring a farmer’s bullock,  
Ordered the disloyal housemaids to sponge down the armchairs  
And tables, while Telemachos, the oxherd and the swineherd  
Scraped the floor with shovels, and then between the portico  
And the roundhouse stretched a hawser and hanged the women  
So none touched the ground with her toes, like long-winged thrushes[.]<sup>55</sup>

Odysseus destroys the female body, along with any associations that he may have had with it through Penelope, Anticleia, and Eurycleia. The simile comparing the maids to birds simultaneously refutes Odysseus’s pan-theism that we witnessed in the previous poem in the sequence. Next Telemachos “dragged Melanthios’s corpse into the haggard / And cut off his nose and ears and cock and balls, a dog’s dinner.”<sup>56</sup> With

this castration, Odysseus is disassociated from man, woman, and beast. He is inhuman and lacks the compassion of even beasts.

Ultimately "The Butchers" forces the reader to question the character of Ulysses of the previous six poems: domestic, loving husband, caring son, mourning master. It conveys a sense of distrust in not only Odysseus, but the poet as well. This very ingeniously captures the sense of general distrust in Northern Ireland, a theme that has become a standard in Heaney ("Whatever You Say Say Nothing" and "Trial Runs" to name two), but is treated very uniquely through Longley's sequence.

Longley has lifted the reader into an objective vantage point throughout the volume, saving peripety for the conclusion in the flight of the suitor's souls:

As they flittered after Hermes, their deliverer, who led them  
Along the clammy sheughs, then past the oceanic streams  
And the white rock, the sun's gatepost in that dreamy region,  
Until they came to a bog-meadow full of bog-asphodels  
Where the residents are ghosts or images of the dead.<sup>57</sup>

The shades have taken flight to Ireland, the land of bogs. Reciprocal violence and revenge killings (like those of Odysseus) have made Northern Ireland into a place where "the residents are ghosts or images of the dead" (similar to "The Waste Land"). Longley not only conveys a sense of outrage against this violence, but also unsexes the people who commit acts of retribution.

Longley continues these themes of sex and violence in his next volume of poetry, *The Ghost Orchid*. While not arranged in a sporadic sequence like the works of *Gorse Fires*, these works deal more directly with gender and the political situation in Northern Ireland. He creates a pair of poems from Ovid's stock, beginning with "Spiderwoman," an eroticized account of the transformation of Arachne. In its own

way, the poem is sexualizing the female body, but accomplishing this through the lens of Ovid and a spider. After her metamorphosis into an arachnid, Arachne

[entices] the eight eyes of my imagination  
To make love on her lethal doily, to dangle sperm  
Like tear drops from an eyelash, massage it into her  
While I avoid the spinnerets – navel, vulva, bum –  
And the widening smile behind her embroidery.  
She wears our babies like brooches on her abdomen.<sup>58</sup>

It seems that Longley is intent in dehumanizing the female body and making it a vehicle of male sexual desire, until we witness his own Tiresian transformation in “A Flowering”: “Now that my body grows woman-like I look at men / As two or three have looked at me, then hide / Among Ovid’s lovely casualties.”<sup>59</sup> This metamorphosis is ephemeral after the creation of his son, and “the truthfulness of my nipples, / Petals that will not last long, that hang on and no more, / Youth and its flower named after the wind, anemone.”<sup>60</sup> The connection to Tiresias is very important here; it endows the poet with a special knowledge of time and its rapid passing. This link to the blind prophet is further solidified by viewing the nipples as flower petals “that hang on,” which recalls T.S. Eliot’s “old man with wrinkled female breasts.”<sup>61</sup> For Longley this feminine sexuality is intense, productive, yet short-lived.

“Poseidon” is a similar gender piece, touching on themes of homoeroticism and male potency. The opening is reminiscent of Leopold Bloom in the “Scylla and Charybdis” episode of *Ulysses*, examining the Greek statues to determine if the gods have anuses: “Standing behind the god Poseidon I can see / Through his buttocks to the scrotum’s omega.”<sup>62</sup> The poem depicts the poet and his mother giving “Grandpa George” a bath and “the same view led me to my mother and me.” Finally, the “god drops whatever he was brandishing / - Trident or thunderbolt – into the bathwater.”

Longley is getting a feminine view (via his mother) of the source of male potency; it is not a "full Monty" shot, but rather the angle from the anus, revealing Longley's perspective as a new feminine male in examining potency.

*The Ghost Orchid* contains several poems that revolve around the Troubles and the recent IRA ceasefire (the volume was published in 1995). "The Helmet" continues several themes that developed in "The Butchers." This poem concerns the departure of Hector from Andromache and his son, and Longley again connects strong violence with the masculine, or more precisely, with the adult male. Viewing his father in full war-garb, Hector's child "howled, terrorised by flashing bronze / And the nightmarish nodding of the horse-hair crest."<sup>63</sup> Like Odysseus in "The Butchers," Hector is dehumanized and associated with a belligerent equine. The second theme that the poet develops is the complicity of society in violence. Andromache laughs with Hector over the child's fear, associating her with jingoistic masculinity; this makes her as complicit in her husband's death as Achilles. Perpetuation of this bloody attitude is guaranteed (maybe) a future by the end of the poem: "[Hector] then kissed the babbie and dandled him in his arms and / Prayed that his son might grow up bloodier than him."<sup>64</sup> Longley is suggesting that the perpetuation of the Troubles will not cease until some generation will refuse to find themselves culpable for the sins of their fathers.

This negotiation occurs in "Ceasefire," where the peace is not only intertribal but intergenerational as well. The center of this piece is the brief respite from war in the *Iliad*, when Achilles gives audience to Priam to plead for the body of Hector. It is the memory of ghosts that compels Achilles to sympathize with the old king: "Put in

mind of his own father and moved to tears / Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king / gently away.”<sup>65</sup> Longley indicates the need for the parties at war to engage in civil conversation and empathize with the other: “When they had eaten together, it pleased them both / To stare at each other’s beauty as lovers might.”<sup>66</sup> There is certainly a great deal of homoeroticism charged within these lines, and it suggests an increasingly feminine presence the closer the two approach peace. Sarah Broom is correct in her insight that “the imagination balks at the idea of David Trimble and Gerry Adams, for example, staring ‘at each other’s beauty as lovers might’.”<sup>67</sup> This is (hilariously) correct, but she devalues the metaphor too much by restrictive applications to both the modern peace process and the *Iliad*. These two analogues may be “more complex and ambivalent than Longley...makes out;”<sup>68</sup> however, his goal is not a political tract analyzing a “very realistic, down-to-earth and accessible process,” but rather a poetic statement of hope triumphing over perpetual bloodshed, to be able to “kiss Achilles’ hand, the killer of my son.”<sup>69</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Heaney, Seamus. *North*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 51.
- <sup>2</sup> Fennell, Desmond. *Heresy: The Battle of Ideas in Modern Ireland*. (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press), 144.
- <sup>3</sup> Heaney, Seamus. *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978*. (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1980), 56.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.
- <sup>5</sup> Coughlan, Patricia. "'Bog Queens': The representation of women in the poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney." *Gender in Irish Writing*. Ed. Toni O'Brien Johnson and David Cairns. (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1991), 99.
- <sup>6</sup> Heaney, Seamus. *Death of a Naturalist*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 44.
- <sup>7</sup> Heaney, Seamus. *An Open Letter*. (Dublin: Field Day Press, 1984), 11.
- <sup>8</sup> McKenna, Bernard. *Rupture, Representation, and the Refashioning of Identity in Drama from the North of Ireland, 1969-1994*. (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 144.
- <sup>9</sup> Heaney, Seamus. *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 1.
- <sup>10</sup> Heaney. *Cure*, 15.
- <sup>11</sup> Heaney. *Naturalist*, 21.
- <sup>12</sup> Heaney. *Cure*, 15.
- <sup>13</sup> Carey, Phyllis. "Heaney and Havel: Parables of Politics." *Seamus Heaney: The Shaping Spirit*. Ed. Phyllis Carey and Catherine Malloy. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), 138.
- <sup>14</sup> Heaney. *Cure*, 3.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

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<sup>19</sup> Heaney. *Cure*, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Cullingford, Elizabeth Butler. *Ireland's Others: Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Popular Culture*. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), 129.

<sup>21</sup> McKittrick, David, and David McVea. *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland*. (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2002), 167.

<sup>22</sup> Cullingford. *Ireland's Others*, 130.

<sup>23</sup> Heaney. *Cure*, 79.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Denard, Hugh. "Seamus Heaney, Colonialism, and the Cure: Sophoclean Re-visions." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*. (22:3), 14.

<sup>25</sup> Heaney, Seamus. *The Spirit Level*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 34.

<sup>26</sup> Collins, Floyd. *Seamus Heaney: The Crisis of Identity*. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 185.

<sup>27</sup> Heaney. *North*, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Heaney. *Spirit Level*, 35.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>31</sup> Coughlan. "Bog Queens," 99.

<sup>32</sup> Heaney. *Spirit Level*, 37.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>36</sup> Heaney, Seamus. *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971-2001*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 3.

<sup>37</sup> Heaney. *Spirit Level*, 45.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

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<sup>39</sup> Heaney. *Spirit Level*, 45.

<sup>40</sup> Heaney, Seamus. *Electric Light*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 45.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>43</sup> Heaney. *North*, 63.

<sup>44</sup> Heaney. *Electric Light*, 50.

<sup>45</sup> Broom, Sarah. "Learning about Dying: Mutability and the Classics in the Poetry of Michael Longley." *New Hibernia Review* (6:1), 94.

<sup>46</sup> Longley, Michael. *Gorse Fires*. (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 1991), 13.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>54</sup> Corcoran, Neil. *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 143.

<sup>55</sup> Longley. *Gorse Fires*, 51.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>58</sup> Longley, Michael. *The Ghost Orchid*. (London: Cape Poetry, 1995), 14.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



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<sup>60</sup> Longley. *The Ghost Orchid*, 14.

<sup>61</sup> Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land and Other Writings*. (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 45.

<sup>62</sup> Longley. *The Ghost Orchid*, 31.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>67</sup> Broom. "Mutability," 109.

<sup>68</sup> Broom. "Mutability," 109.

<sup>69</sup> Longley. *The Ghost Orchid*, 39.

Reversal, Rape, and Revision: The Classics in the Poetry of Mary O'Malley, Nuala Ni  
Dhomhnaill, and Eavan Boland

Although rights for Irish women during the 1990s were significantly improved from, say, the 1910s, there remained remarkably binary gender spheres. An illustration of this comes from the 1994 Northern Ireland Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, where "the female members were told to 'go home and make the tea'."<sup>1</sup> In this same time frame, Mary O'Malley, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, and Eavan Boland increasingly employed tropes of Greek and Roman mythology for the purpose of exploiting this gender gap and its system of enforcement. Or rather, they re-employ these tropes, for the resultant images that are created by these women often resemble their classical counterparts in name and general plot only. All three share some themes (a regendered muse for example); however, individually each brings a different treatment of the themes of sex and violence. O'Malley rescues the female body, feminine sexuality, and Leda from the classics and Yeats, while also transferring the burden of childbirth to the masculine; Ni Dhomhnaill channels female sexuality as inspiration and offers "emblems of adversity" for the Protestant and Catholic dichotomy; Boland demolishes the male tradition and erects a new feminist mythology in its place.

I.

Mary O'Malley's most recent poetry seems to offer a loose support for what she introduced in 1997 with the opening poem of *The Knife in the Wave*, "Meditation on the Long Walk." *Asylum Road* offers two treatments that are pertinent to this discussion: "Wanted, Muse" and "The Stone Nymph." Each piece seeks to displace the normal positioning of the female body in classical and Irish tradition.

For contemporary female poets, a poem that revises the gender of a muse is now becoming obligatory. O'Malley's is distinguishable in that it reinvents the traits of the Greek muse to suit the needs of a modern female poet, thus subjugating the masculine body and objectifying it in accordance with the classical female model, and then defends itself with a "classical" concept of art. She opens the poem by tapping into the ideal image of a female Muse and modernizing her, but also making her distinctively Irish with the pet name "Rosaleen."<sup>2</sup> This also has connotations of another female object created by Irish males, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, a.k.a. Dark Rosaleen. The classified advertisement does not necessarily place value on female education, and the level of schooling is negotiable:

Degree optional though it is  
essential to be literate – you'll be required  
to read the poet's work, to distinguish  
his gifts from his attributes – analysis  
won't be necessary.<sup>3</sup>

Again, this is the typical male depiction of the female: educated enough to serve his purposes, but any further knowledge is superfluous, presumptuous, and possibly dangerous. She is required to be passive and is not allowed to make her own marks

and criticisms upon the poet's work. Particularly interesting is the allusion to and mocking of the aisling tradition:

A tendency to appear shrouded in mist  
early in the morning, but only when  
accompanying the poet on his visits  
to the country – aishlingi are passé in the town.<sup>4</sup>

The poet's want ad is rapidly becoming a prescription for enclosing female existence; her movements are limited, and so is her physical appearance, encouraged to "dye [your hair] if you must" to suit the poetic ideal. In the final stanza, O'Malley offers a rejoinder in four brief lines and reverses the inferior role:

Are you young, male, with long legs and bi-  
lingual skills? Poetry is an equal opportunity employer.  
Gardening and good biceps are a priority.  
Sigh if you must, but remember, poets value muscularity.<sup>5</sup>

The genders have been upended, and so has the job description. Education is a priority, but so is the more feminine activity of gardening. Female sexuality now dominates, requiring "good biceps" and justifying them by a masculine conception of good art, citing that "poets value muscularity." In the brief space of this poem, O'Malley has performed a coup on classical aesthetics and the Irish poetic tradition, reinvigorating the position of the female as a poet instead of a muse in poetic discourse.

Of all the Greek and Roman myths, the tale of Pygmalion is perhaps the most extreme case of using the female body as an instrument of male sexual pleasure. In that tale, Pygmalion is an intense misogynist who creates a statue that is a tribute to perfect feminine beauty. He becomes infatuated with the statue, supplicates Venus to bring her to life, and is eventually granted his wish,<sup>6</sup> certainly not a flattering portrait

of equality by modern feminist standards. O'Malley seizes on this story and reinvisions the tale from all angles, resulting in a poem that releases uncontrollable female carnality.

O'Malley's first revision is in the sex of the artist; instead of the woman-hating Pygmalion, we are given a female sculptor "like a God in goggles."<sup>7</sup> This not only redeems the female body from being the recipient of male abuse, but projects a certain homoerotic element upon the poem as well, not to mention placing the female in the role of creator twice, both as poet and sculptor. The narrator enters the scene just as the artist is finishing her work as a matter-of-fact event, but in the second stanza we see the female statue as

She rolled lazily out of the stone,  
a young strap, beyond control already.  
She smiled through the grainy dust  
as if Jove himself had just left her.<sup>8</sup>

This explosion of female sexuality is a marked difference from the original, and even challenges former Irish versions of the story like Patrick Kavanagh's "stone-proud woman" who refused sexual advances from farmers.<sup>9</sup> However, O'Malley is ambiguous about this awakening of female sexuality, or at least treats the ordeal tongue-in-cheek. It is a heightened corporeal consciousness, but it does have consequences: "The look on the artist's face was saying / in nine months time, my lady / you'll get your comeuppance."<sup>10</sup> This is a sly reference to other progeny that have resulted from unions with Zeus, a theme that O'Malley had presented earlier in "Meditation on the Long Walk."

The opening poem to O'Malley's *The Knife in the Wave*, "Meditation on the Long Walk," established the goal of her revisionist agenda, and more specifically

initiated her movement to refute the assumptions of both Classical and Irish traditions. The poem assaults the premise of Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" and the mythological story upon which his poem is based. Her method is almost rhetorical; first she presents the assumptions made by Yeats's work, then presents her own set of givens (inverted from Yeats), and finally activates her theory into practice. She opens with the pregnant line, "Desire would be a simple thing."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it is a lack of sexual complexity that moves feminist critics to draw unfavorable conclusions about the quality of Yeats's "Leda," that it "exposes the brutality of the male or divine exercise of force."<sup>12</sup> O'Malley reveals how this makes Leda the instrument, or more appropriately the vessel, of divine will:

Her life was transformed by his seed,  
What was engendered revealed  
The mystery of what she understood  
Economically preserved  
In a ripple of uncluttered hindsight.<sup>13</sup>

The poet is asserting that Zeus was not the only one abusing Leda's body for godlike purposes, as Yeats used her for his private concerns, both political and poetic.

O'Malley refuses to accept his rationality: "Flip the coin and let the wives out." She rearranges the situation with "inverted swans' necks" and proceeds to castrate Yeats, Zeus, and the entire masculine conceit of sexual brutality and knowledge:

With her beak  
Savage at his loins  
Indifferent to all but his seed  
Is there talk of ecstasy and knowledge  
Among the tumbling feathers?<sup>14</sup>

This returns to the opening line of the poem, that “desire would be a simple thing” if it followed the guidelines provided by male poets, but it doesn’t. This mingling of the sexual abuse of the female body and poetic knowledge is ludicrous, and O’Malley shows this by usurping the gender supremacy of Yeats.

In the culminating stanza, she admits the attractiveness of such an option, but considers it from a feminine vantage point: “That lust without responsibility / She peeled back to pure desire / Him a real God.” Female sexual urges now hold a privileged position; she submits to the masculine model, only to realize how frivolous it really is: “And a few thousand years away / A poet trawling the night sky / For a single blinding metaphor.”<sup>15</sup> O’Malley demonstrates that this homogeneous method is severely reductive and that it refuses to consider other possibilities that are available. If we are to believe Cullingford that “[‘Leda and the Swan’] intervenes in cultural politics via the representation of a female body and the enactment of a male desire for power,”<sup>16</sup> then O’Malley also engages in “cultural politics,” but with a goal of leveling the playing field rather than asserting some role of violent superiority.

## II.

In *The Water Horse*, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill explores many of the same issues that Mary O’Malley had previously examined. However, she does so in her own humorous and insightful way, and further extends the male/female relationship and violence cycle to engage with contemporary events in Northern Ireland.

Ni Dhomhnaill's difficulty with the previous models for male poets is that "they are talking about their inner woman and projecting it onto us."<sup>17</sup> However, she doesn't enter into this enterprise light-heartedly:

[The] male muse is ferociously dangerous. Number one, being a man, he's inclined to all or nothing action: killing yourself, walking out of a relationship, black or white, right or wrong. Number two, he's allied with society against you, against your deeper levels of femininity, because he's male.<sup>18</sup>

This is the basic premise behind "Prodigal Muse," with some modifications. Her muse poem is akin to O'Malley's in that it inverts the usual role of a male poet waiting for his passive female muse. Where she differs is in her treatment of sexuality, as the arrival of her itinerant inspiration excites not only a flurry of poetic activity, but erotic relations as well. Her method is less passive than O'Malley's approach, and indeed develops into outright belligerence as she addresses the god to send a vision:

I'm practically at death's door,  
not a penny to my name,  
sacrificed as a penance  
on your damn altar,  
and what the hell  
have I got to show for it?<sup>19</sup>

When her muse does arrive, he is not "the distant Beatrice"<sup>20</sup> that male poets have a tendency to project, but rather he is "cool and dandy."<sup>21</sup>

What occurs after his ingress is where the poet has her most severe break with tradition. Instead of a frenzied outburst of poetic activity (daffodils and violets and the like), she has what could best be described as a seizure of sexuality:

I come out in  
an all-over body-rash,  
my erect nipples  
in for a nuzzling  
by the stomach of the chimney  
stack, or the cubby-hole



under the stairs.<sup>22</sup>

Her muse is not the male, but her own female sexuality. The product of the return of the "Prodigal Muse" is not only a poem, but an employment of the male as an instrument to satisfy female sexual desire. This is a recurring theme throughout the volume, such as in "'Fhir a' Bhata," where a woman is waiting for her lover to return; however, she is no passive Penelope, being rather forceful in her directions:

Sail in, my lad,  
Sail your boat  
In between the shining petals  
In my heart, in my core.<sup>23</sup>

As in prodigal muse, the typical objectification of the female has been reversed; the woman is fully in control, instructing the male to give her sexual pleasure.

"Daphne and Apollo" also revolves around the subject of female sexuality, but in a very different manner. It concerns the story of the wood nymph that fled the sexual advances of the sun god and was rescued by her father (the river-god, Peneus) and was transformed into a laurel tree to preserve her virginity.<sup>24</sup> In the first three stanzas, Ni Dhomhnaill recapitulates the Ovidian tale. However, the fourth stanza opens the interrogation: what would have happened if Daphne had given into the wishes of the god of poetry, if she would have opened the "door leaves of [her] heart"?<sup>25</sup>

Initially it seems that Ni Dhomhnaill is asserting a female receptiveness to sexual advances, so long as they are non-violent (i.e. feminine): "He wasn't the liver-tearing, date-rape type, / but the sun-god pouring inspiration-grace."<sup>26</sup> She is making an attempt to rescue a virgin from social mores, if it is with a "preferable" mate. Or is she? There are certain elements in the poem that are ambiguous, and she enters this

favorability of male advances with caution. In particular, Ni Dhomhnaill is addressing this amorous encounter of randy god and female within a framework of another such instance, Yeats's "Leda and the Swan." Apollo is in command of the nature that surrounds him, and it is this control that unnerves the conclusion of the poem:

When this harpist  
tautens his strings, the water snake  
stands to attention; at this dawn  
chorus, silence spills like a swan.<sup>27</sup>

Although this passage is not explicit, it certainly has eerie connotations. It is devoid of all the sentimental ambience noise of a love poem, i.e. birds singing and brooks chattering. The notation that "silence spills like a swan" is what reminds us of Yeats. Earlier in the poem, Apollo's advances were called an "epiphanic assault," recalling the ultimate question of Yeats's piece, "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?"<sup>28</sup> Ni Dhomhnaill advocates Daphne accepting Apollo as a lover, but only on equal terms of sexual intercourse. She is not meant to be a vessel for the god, refusing the seed that would "spill" and lead to disastrous foreknowledge for Daphne.

In "Plutonium," Ni Dhomhnaill turns from a direct engagement with gender issues and instead offers a scathing attack on the violence of Northern Ireland and the patriarchal order of the churches that fuel the conflict. It centers on an underground hole that was formerly a temple in Hellenic times (although the poem is set in modern-day Turkey). Ni Dhomhnaill is similar to Heaney in that she superimposes the ancient Greek culture upon modern day Ireland, upsetting a complacent order with a new insight into the role of the church and the Troubles; "Plutonium" is also reminiscent of Heaney's "Personal Helicon" in that it creates a feminine space via a mine/well, but

goes further by establishing a particular feminine discourse in the form of her mentally unstable aunt. The current site of the temple is restricted, noting that "Dangerous gases are found here." Next is a piece of poetic time-traveling, moving to the time of the "eunuch priests" that administered rites at the holy site:

[They] were so practiced in breathing the poisonous clouds  
That they could walk freely  
Not caring for the deathly atmosphere  
While people fell down in flocks  
Dead on every side.<sup>29</sup>

This anthropological study quickly returns to modern times, when we find the poet visiting a family member in a mental institution. The woman thinks that the place is full of Protestants, and that they want her to apostatize; the poet notes that the Soupers of the Great Famine (Protestants that dished out soup in exchange for conversion from Catholicism) are at least two generations removed from this woman. She calls this glaring anachronism the "radioactive rain / of History. A deadly residue / Of starvation and Soupers." The poisonous gas emerges "From Plutonium, the dreadful / Church of the Infernal Gods."<sup>30</sup>

Ni Dhomhnaill uses the ancient precedent of the ministers to the Greek gods to provide a framework for the modern Catholic and Protestant religions. The priests and reverends foment the rancor that perpetuates the vitriol of the Troubles, but then walk in comparative safety through "the deathly atmosphere." She resists the patriarchal order that supports the cult of the "Infernal Religion," recognizing that the Church requires a structure that is both hierarchal and bipolar in order to survive. On an apposite path, Ni Dhomhnaill suggests that the church imposes gender inferiority upon women, as the female family patient is kept in fear by the lies of the church. The

violence of the Troubles and the subjection of women are symptomatic of the greater difficulty of an oppressive patriarchy; she suggests constant skepticism of gender roles and the apparatus that maintains them, and vigilantly struggles to invert these fixed positions to achieve a balanced male/female equilibrium.

### III.

The assertion that Eavan Boland is a female poet with a gendered agenda can hardly be in dispute. What is open to interpretation is the goal of that feminism and how it differs from the previous two poets that I have discussed. While O'Malley and Ni Dhomhnaill share with Boland an intense approach to the themes of domestic and political violence, they also are concerned (perhaps obsessively so) with a reclamation of female sexuality. Boland focuses on sex as well, but not so much on the act of copulation itself as on the result of the propagation, namely motherhood, childhood, and psychological change from carnal knowledge. Her object is the transformation of the female's role in literature, to energize a paradigm shift from a male-projected female image that is utilized for various purposes (war, sex, etc.) to a newly-created domestic set of tropes.

Boland has employed the classical tradition throughout her career, perhaps more than any other poet or playwright discussed in this essay. In establishing her new female order, she turns to the Greeks and Romans as the origin of all western mythology and thought; by reading myth as history, perhaps the motivated female poet can cultivate a uniquely feminine if not necessarily feminist history from the remnants of male discourse. Her initial task is similar to O'Malley's and Ni Dhomhnaill's, to

create a muse that is segregated from masculine experience and is able to faithfully portray female concerns. Boland's version is belligerent and domestic, but not even remotely as sexual as the previous two women are; and other than "The Muse Mother," these poems also contain a strong undercurrent of private and public violence. Her first "muse" composition is the aptly titled "Tirade for the Mimic Muse," a piece that demolishes the old conception of a female muse in favor of a more domestic model.

The poem opens in a very catty fashion, with the poet addressing the muse with epithets like "slut," "fat trout," "whore," and "ruthless bitch."<sup>31</sup> She is accused of pandering to male tastes and dolling herself up with exquisite make-up in order to satisfy a masculine aesthetic. However, "not one of them disguise / That there's a dead millennium in [her] eyes." Here Boland is invoking a Yeatsian concept of the end of a historical cycle; the new age will revolve around the true female existence.

The third stanza is significant enough to quote in full:

With what drums and dances, what deceits  
Rituals and flatteries of war,  
Chants and pipes and witless empty rites  
And war-like men  
And wet-eyed patient women  
You did protect yourself from horrors,  
From the lizarding of eyelids  
From the whiskering of nipples,  
From the slow betrayals of our bedroom mirrors[.]<sup>32</sup>

Boland is pulsing between two epochs; initially using the abuses of antiquity as trope, she quickly fast-forwards to contemporary bedroom betrayals. The poem is also shifting from the masculine sphere of political violence to a scene of domestic violence as the upshot of this aggression. This paternal construction of a muse chose

to ignore "the scream of beaten women, / The crime of babies battered, / The hubbub and the shriek of daily grief."<sup>33</sup> Boland wants to shame the Mimic Muse out of existence, to have her recognize the sins of her past. With this accomplished, she establishes her poetic agenda: "I will wake you from your sluttish sleep. / I will show you true reflections, terrors."<sup>34</sup> This recalls Stephen Dedalus's "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."<sup>35</sup> Indeed, their situations are similar. Stephen is a young Irish artist attempting to find proper emblems to represent Ireland, but he does not find them in the mist of the Celtic Twilight. Boland wants to create symbols that are adequate for her situation, and she cannot discover them working in a masculine tradition; so she creates a new domestic medium, a "Muse Mother" that might "teach me / a new language."<sup>36</sup>

Her other angry muse poem, "Tirade for the Lyric Muse," directs rage not at the tawdry female image, but at the traditions that has left her bruised and battered. Like Cathleen Ni Houlihan, her youth is constantly renewed, but with a price exacted in "a stench of snipped flesh / and tubed blood."<sup>37</sup> She refutes Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" with the line "It may be beauty / but it isn't truth." For Boland, the truth exists on the periphery of the tradition in a feminine narrative that exposes masculine abuse (both psychological and physical) and domestic history. The muse has "no sense of time" because she lives outside of history; she is ahistorical. Unlike the Mimic Muse, Boland does not find the Lyric Muse culpable for her existence; in fact, she understands the attraction to the standard tradition of mythology, noting that "the ends were easy / and the means were short / when you and I were lyric and elect."<sup>38</sup> However, within that attitude is an encoded history of domestic violence and

subjection of women. In the concluding lines of the poem, Boland launches her platform of recovery:

We have been sisters  
in the crime.  
Let us be sisters  
in the physic:  
Listen.  
Bend your darned head.  
Turn your good ear.  
Share my music.<sup>39</sup>

The music that Boland is creating centers on recovering myth, a type of literary anthropology. These muse poems map out a track that her employment of the classics will follow; it is an establishment of apposite roads. On one hand, she will attempt to expose the abuses that have been masked by myth and a masculine tradition; on the other she will turn the canon around and use it on the enemy, destroying masculine myth to restore the feminine.

The first instance of Boland exposing the violent undertow of history through a Grecian lens is in the opening poem of her first collection. "Athene's Song" fits nicely into Boland's corpus, but it is incongruous in *New Territory*. The remainder of that collection involves "stock women from myth, received images from male poetry, typically in the forms of overwhelming tradition."<sup>40</sup> Although this precedes the muse poems, it should be noted that those works are programmatic and provide framework for a theory that has already been in practice during Boland's career. "Athene's Song" depicts the birth of Athene from Zeus's forehead, an event that has symbolic importance for Boland because it demonstrates that all female images in myth spring from male minds. He created her as a goddess of war, but she soon "made in Athens

wood / Upon my knees a new music."<sup>41</sup> Her music sang the tunes of nature and of truth.

However, the patriarchal structure that makes women inferior to men also makes peace subservient to war. Conflict breaks out, and Athene is called with battle cries and supplications and is reminded of her role as the goddess of war. She drops her flute to respond: "Beside the water, lost and mute, / Lies my pipe and like my mind / Remains unknown, remains unknown."<sup>42</sup> Athene's music is lost to history and myth as she is called away to serve the bloody purpose for which men created her. Boland's poetic program is to recover this music embedded in myth.

She deals with sexual abuse by using a trope previously discussed by Ni Dhomhnaill, namely the myth of Daphne and Apollo. This myth is addressed in two poems, each with a different import. "Daphne with her Thighs in Bark" concerns submitting to sexual abuse if only to continue with life; "Daphne Heard with Horror the Addresses of the God" deals more with modern times and how reading history through myth can have current implications. The former poem also accomplishes this, though through more didactic methods:

I have written this  
so that,  
in the next myth,  
my sister will be wiser.  
Let her learn from me:  
the opposite of passion  
is not virtue  
but routine.<sup>43</sup>

What follows develops into an argument similar to Ni Dhomhnaill's, which proposes that Daphne should have submitted to sexual passion. It is equally ambiguous, equating a sexual encounter with Apollo as a "rut" session producing "rough heat,"



then revealing the laurel version of Daphne getting randy for a chestnut tree;<sup>44</sup> the idea that the poem “[limits] the female and reduce[s] her status to that of victim”<sup>45</sup> is not explicit. However, the tragedy is not the nymph’s lament at being transformed into a sexless tree, but at being ascribed to mere myth. Instead of a life of sex (consensual or not) and a domestic existence, she is reduced to an object lesson of maintaining virginity, at the cost of becoming (literally) arboreal. It is this domestic existence that Boland argues is lost to the pernicious force of myth; Daphne is not portrayed “cooking, / making coffee, [or] scrubbing wood,”<sup>46</sup> but as a sexless nymph that sacrifices a feminine existence to preserve chastity.

If “Daphne with her Thighs in Bark” illustrates how a historical woman can be imbedded into myth, “Daphne Heard with Horror the Addresses of the God” demonstrates how we should properly interpret myth as history and be edified as a result. A woman is telling the poet “about the wedding of a local girl, / long ago, and a merchant from Argyll”;<sup>47</sup> the poet cannot concentrate owing to her focus on the garden. She notes that the laurel hedge is not Daphne, but only a laurel; modernity is “free of any need / for nymphs, goddesses, wounded presences.” Meantime, her companion is finishing her description of the wedding, and the concluding stanza witnesses the two leaving the garden, but not without the speaker noticing “A suggestion, / behind it all, of darkness. In the shadow, / beside the laurel hedge, its gesture.”<sup>48</sup> The myth and the wedding collide in lines of convergence: the tale of Daphne could easily be a fantastical account of “a local girl” that married a Greek wine merchant. It is a tale that is relevant (and occurring) today, of a man that takes a woman as wife (take in the property sense) and whisks her away. Sexual violence is

lost in this poem because it is not necessary; female identity has been erased by male prerogatives, and this sense of blankness supercedes any sense of violation.

To fill the three-thousand year gender gap of history, Boland offers a new *herstory* (admittedly now a cliché term in gender studies, but it accurately depicts her methods); she takes Greek myth and makes it mutable, shaping it to fit her new feminine mythos, substituting tales of male sexual dominance and violence with a narrative of a more nurturing domestic role. The archetype to which she is most attracted is that of Proserpina and Ceres, a tale where the daughter is stolen away to the underworld by Dis and the mother is forced to broker a deal to see her for the spring and summer seasons; the feminine subtext of this is “the cost of Persephone’s freedom is darkness, separation from maternal warmth, and the earth’s wintry barrenness.”<sup>49</sup> *In a Time of Violence* displays her initial use of this trope in the poem “The Pomegranate,” where she portrays herself as both daughter and mother. As a daughter, she is the child of parents in self-imposed exile; as a mother, she “[shares] in the intensity of her maternal love and of its attendant fears.”<sup>50</sup> She recovers her daughter, but realizes that her progeny will eventually return to the darkness with nascent adolescent sexuality. The poet imagines a “plate of uncut fruit” to be a pomegranate that her child has yet to partake of and that there is still a possibility to save her. However, like the Daphne poems, this forced chastity is futile and unnatural: “If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift.”<sup>51</sup> Under her aegis, she allows her daughter to partake of the fruit, because it is her role in fulfilling the myth. Like “Daphne Heard with Horror,” “The Pomegranate” seeks to be a palimpsest, with Boland’s mythology overwriting myth, but with vestiges of the antecedent remaining.

In *The Lost Land*, Boland revisits the myth of Proserpine and Ceres, but now attempts to empathize with the allegory, digging for the source of its meaning. The general theme of the "Daughter" sequence and "Ceres Looks at the Morning" is that the seasonal invention was a mother's poetic way of coping with the loss of a daughter to life's typical course: sexual knowledge, a husband, and a family of her own. To be more specific, this is the story of a mature, post-menopausal woman:

If I wanted a child now  
I could not have one.  
Except through memory.  
Which is the ghost of the body.  
Or myth.  
Which is the ghost of meaning.<sup>52</sup>

The absence of the child is made more acute by the impossibility of having another. The return of a daughter is "a promise / only myth can keep."<sup>53</sup> This is the point at which myth is created, as Boland demonstrates in "Ceres Looks at the Morning." The mother asks the summer dawn to:

look at me as a daughter would  
look: with that love and that curiosity:  
as to what she came from.  
And what she will become.<sup>54</sup>

Thus the poem becomes a vehicle to make modern memory into myth. This sequence is the coup de grace in her programmatic restructuring of the western male tradition. Earlier forays into the classics allowed Boland to expose the inequities that were inherent in the tradition; having established this, she assumed the role of an anthropological investigator, teasing a uniquely feminine history from myth; the Ceres series of poems completes the cycle, creating a new female myth based on modern

suburban female experience, thus subverting the various patterns and mythologies of masculine political and domestic violence in favor of a nurturing maternal tradition.

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- <sup>1</sup> Foley, Imelda. *The Girls in the Big Picture: Gender in Contemporary Ulster Theater*. (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press), xii.
- <sup>2</sup> O'Malley, Mary. *Asylum Road*. (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Poetry, 1997), 60.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., 60.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 60.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., 60.
- <sup>6</sup> Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. Rolfe Humphries. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 241-243.
- <sup>7</sup> O'Malley. *Asylum Road*, 79.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 79.
- <sup>9</sup> Kavanagh, Patrick. *Collected Poems*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1964), 31.
- <sup>10</sup> O'Malley. *Asylum Road*, 79.
- <sup>11</sup> O' Malley, Mary. *The Knife in the Wave*. (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Poetry, 1997), 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Cullingford, Elizabeth Butler. *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 164.
- <sup>13</sup> O'Malley. *Knife*, 1.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1.
- <sup>16</sup> Cullingford. *Yeats's Love Poetry*, 145.
- <sup>17</sup> Quoted in Wilson, Rebecca E. and Gillean Somerville-Arjat, Ed. *Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets*. (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), 150.
- <sup>18</sup> Quoted in Ibid., 150.
- <sup>19</sup> Ni Dhomhnaill, Nuala. *The Water Horse*. (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2000), 91.

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- <sup>20</sup> Quoted in Wilson. *Monsters*, 153.
- <sup>21</sup> Ni Dhomhnaill. *Water Horse*, 91.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.
- <sup>24</sup> Ovid. *Metamorphoses*, 16-20.
- <sup>25</sup> Ni Dhomhnaill. *Water Horse*, 65.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.
- <sup>28</sup> Yeats, William Butler. *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose*. Ed. James Pethica. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000), 96.
- <sup>29</sup> Ni Dhomhnaill. *Water Horse*, 55.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.
- <sup>31</sup> Boland, Eavan. *Collected Poems*. (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1995), 55.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.
- <sup>35</sup> Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Ed. Hans Walter Gabler. (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 28.
- <sup>36</sup> Boland. *Collected Poems*, 93.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.
- <sup>40</sup> Foster, Thomas C. "In from the Margin: Eavan Boland's 'Outside History' Sequence." *Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Some Male Perspectives*. Ed. Alexander G. Gonzalez. (London: Greenwood Press), 1.

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<sup>41</sup> Boland. *Collected Poems*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

<sup>45</sup> Foster. "In From the Margin," 3.

<sup>46</sup> Boland. *Collected Poems*, 81.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>49</sup> Hagen, Patricia L. and Thomas W. Zelman. *Eavan Boland and the History of the Ordinary*. (Dublin: Maunsel & Co., 2004), 108.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>51</sup> Boland. *Collected Poems*, 185.

<sup>52</sup> Boland, Eavan. *The Lost Land*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 46.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 49.

### Girly-Men and Manly Girls:

#### Gender and Violence in Frank McGuinness's *Carthaginians* and *Electra*

Frank McGuinness, more than any other playwright of the period (and maybe more than any Irish writer, period), has made a full frontal assault on the issue of gender roles in Ireland. As an openly gay playwright, he certainly has the proper motivation to force the Irish populace to reassess their conception of sex and gender. Indeed his career "has coincided with the time period during which the Irish gay community...has secured greater rights and increased visibility."<sup>1</sup> However, the task of reforming gender roles in a Catholic country (and even in Protestant Northern Ireland) is a Sisyphean task. The 1990s witnessed great attitudinal changes concerning gender in Ireland, such as the 1993 Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalized sodomy (a full ten years before the United States did the same),<sup>2</sup> but also reaffirmed policies banning abortion and, until late in the decade, divorce. The Vatican was slow on the uptake, but eventually confronted the situation in July 2004 with this statement:

In order to avoid the domination of one sex or the other, their differences tend to be denied, viewed as mere effects of historical and cultural conditioning. In this perspective, physical difference, termed *sex*, is minimized, while the purely cultural element, termed *gender*, is emphasized to the maximum and held to be primary. The obscuring of the difference or duality of the sexes has enormous consequences on a variety of levels. This theory of the human person, intended to promote prospects for equality of women through liberation from biological determinism, has in reality inspired ideologies which, for example, call into question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father, and make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality.<sup>3</sup>



In effect, this statement is more conservative than previous Papal policy (if that is possible); instead of halting in the specific issue of homosexuality, the Church is more concerned with maintaining traditional gender roles outlined in the Judeo-Christian tradition than with the specific issue of sexuality. A male-female relationship that is equitable in gender roles is "virtually equivalent" with homosexuality.

This is the crux of McGuinness's "queer" agenda; he is not so much asserting sexual equality but gender equality, which is a discussion more about cultural values than sexual orientation. Men do not need to become women or homosexuals, but to realize that "it would only be through a recognition and reappropriation of the feminine principle that revolution in both society and literature could take place."<sup>4</sup> He certainly produces what can be termed as "homosexual" plays (*Innocence* and, more subtly, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*), but the overarching theme is gender, "[creating] a hybrid culture from fixed identities."<sup>5</sup> His most overt manipulation of gender roles occurs in *Carthaginians*, where McGuinness uses a blend of classical literature and pop culture to create "'disturbances' to the masculinity of Western discourse."<sup>6</sup> In his version of Sophocles's *Electra*, he addresses gender roles with a reverse approach, by implanting the modern into the classics. Each plays off delicately balanced gender roles to reassess the relation of masculinity and violence within the society of Northern Ireland.

## I.

Generally speaking, *Carthaginians* is "steeped in an almost Jacobean morbidity combined with Beckettian absurdity."<sup>7</sup> This probably accounts for its

lukewarm reception with critics, especially compared with *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*. However, this assessment is not entirely accurate, as McGuinness's play is not nearly as austere as Beckett's work; rather it is more like Beckett on Prozac dealing with gender issues. McGuinness is not as bleak as the Nobel laureate, but his conclusion to *Carthaginians* is not quite optimistic either. He noted in an interview that Derry is "a city that people are frightened of. The city as an empire is Rome. It is a city with ruins and the only way you can find out about it is from the ruins and its graveyard."<sup>8</sup>

What emerges from the debris (in terms of Carthage and Derry) is a championing of a new and gendered approach to creating a peaceful society. It represents the downfall of one society (the "male cult" referred to by Seamus Heaney, although McGuinness is hardly a partisan) and replaces it with one of "which women are the generators and custodians, a symbolically post-colonial future which is founded on a feminist principle."<sup>9</sup> To be more specific, he arranges for the possibility of a more feminist future that is constructed on forgiveness and peace. The play does not bludgeon the audience with a "feminine principle," but instead creates a gender space that is fluid and dynamic, where nothing is stable and therefore cannot be drawn into a binary ideological argument. McGuinness's goal is to upset the status quo inverting standard gender roles and identification, thus drawing attention to their inadequacy in both political and domestic discourses. This is largely demonstrated through the characters of the play, although portions of it emerge from the action as well.

The central character of *Carthaginians* is Dido, the "queen of Derry."<sup>10</sup>

Dido's position in relation to the other characters is that of an accepted outsider; he is mutable, and changes roles erratically. Of course, his analogue is Virgil's Dido from *The Aeneid* and it is important to mark the similarities. The Roman's Dido is simultaneously pre-colonial and post-colonial; she is post-colonial as she watches Aeneas leave the port of Carthage; in our anticipation of the Roman Empire, we also recognize her as pre-colonial. Ultimately, McGuinness's character out-Didos Dido; not only is he feminine (as Hark's homophobia classifies him), but he is male, thus addressing established gender roles from a neutral position; perhaps most importantly, the fate of his city is dictated by two patriarchal structures, one as the British Empire and the other as the Roman Catholic Church. He is trapped by two Romes.

Several analyses of *Carthaginians* have focused mainly on Dido as a gendered character; however, his primacy is a result of his relative constancy, that is, he begins with ambiguous gender roles and ends equally ambiguous; he "thrives in the full awareness of his own sexual identity." Imelda Foley is correct in asserting that "Dido disturbs fixed, perceptions of sexuality," but she perhaps overextends by calling him a "Christ figure."<sup>11</sup> Rather, he serves as the instrument of change to reorganize those living in the graveyard according to a "feminine principle." This said, the other characters in the play deserve as much attention simply because they shift their gender to harmonize with Dido.

Although it cannot be established whether McGuinness structured his dynamic of gender confusion around contemporary discourses of psychology and social deviance, the similarities between his characters and what the *Diagnostic and*

*Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* (published 1980) identifies as "Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood" cannot be ignored. In comparing the *DSM* (as the basis for identifying gender roles) with McGuinness's gender development in *Carthaginians*, we can notice the marked difference between the playwright's ideal roles and that of official "scientific" (i.e., "official") conception of what defines a male and female even from an early age; he attacks and inverts these established codes of conduct. This was the first *DSM* that did not list homosexuality as a mental disorder, but it did add the new disorder of "gender identity." Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that there is a certain bias in this recent analysis, that the scope for the male version of the disorder is more inclusive than the female.<sup>12</sup> It is easy enough to note how this analysis applies to Dido:

Boys with this disorder invariably are preoccupied with female stereotypical activities. They may have a preference for dressing in girls' or women's clothes, or may improvise such items from available material when genuine articles are not available.[...] Gestures and actions are often judged against a standard of cultural stereotype to be feminine, and the boy is invariably subjected to male peer group teasing and rejection[.]<sup>13</sup>

McGuinness's gay character encompasses most of the broad range of symptoms for male gender disorder, and in fact revels in them. This definition is so broad that it is difficult to connect the *DSM* specifically to Dido. The symptoms for females, however, are another story:

[A] girl with this disorder claims that she will grow up to become a man (not merely in role), that she is biologically unable to become pregnant, that she will not develop breasts, or that she has, or will grow, a penis.<sup>14</sup>

Within this narrow framework, the analogue to McGuinness's character of Greta is quite palpable; she is a masculine woman that must submit to her femininity in order to achieve personal (and by symbolism public) peace.

Other than Hark, Greta is the most masculine character in *Carthaginians*, even though there are a total of four males. The parallel with the *DSM* "gender disorder" occurs in the fifth scene, remembering the "first time that the moon touched [her]," i.e., menstruation. She accepted it as a sign that she was turning into a male, and a penis would follow in its wake. Greta was rather accepting of this fate: "For months afterwards, whenever I was lonely, I'd touch my breasts, and say, at least I'll soon have a brother and he'll be myself."<sup>15</sup> This lamentation for a lost male is evocative of another character in Irish literature, Gretta Conroy, who mourned for the "delicate" Michael Furey against the backdrop of another barren landscape.<sup>16</sup> This accounts for the lamentation that she sings throughout the play concerning a lost brother that "drowned in the river."<sup>17</sup>

This identification with the male is not without a cause; it occurs as a result of Greta's mother. When Greta's menstruation appears, she asks her mother what is happening. The answer she receives is typically Irish: it is a result of the fairies; her mother said that "the bad fairies gave little girls blood."<sup>18</sup> This secret, among others, was divulged underneath the kitchen table as if it were a taboo topic. Indeed, Greta's mother denigrates her sexuality to a taboo status, thus forcing Greta to anticipate a penis so that she may acquire some sense of self worth. This is strikingly parallel to the *DSM*:

Females who later develop this disorder have mothers who were apparently unavailable to them at a very early age, either psychologically or physically, because of illness or abandonment; the girl seems to make compensatory identification with the father, which leads to the adoption of a male gender identity.<sup>19</sup>

However, Greta does not identify with her father, the man who "nearly died" when she asked him about her period.<sup>20</sup> Instead she relates to a brother that she never had, and

proof positive for his arrival was in her menstrual discharge. Later in the play we learn that she has been further robbed of her sexuality by a hysterectomy, resulting from a possible aborted pregnancy or rape. Although the text does not state this explicitly, she “deserved what was done to her,”<sup>21</sup> thus depicting female sexuality as a scapegoat.

McGuinness fully develops Greta’s sexual history in scene seven, which has remained an undercurrent throughout the play. The women of the play (Greta, Maela, and Sarah) swap dirty jokes as a bulwark against confronting their demons. Essentially these jokes revolve specifically around Greta’s predicament. The first is about a man that goes to a doctor with a pain between his legs; his penis has fallen off and he has smoked it accidentally. The second concerns three women (English, French, and Derry) eating bananas, but the Derry woman reluctantly performs oral sex on the banana (symbolic of a detached penis). The final joke is not a joke at all. Greta wants to tell a joke, but Hark demands that she “tell the truth” about herself, resulting in her history delivered as a gag. Anne Kelly-O’Reilly is correct in stating that these jokes are “further manifestations of the wound in the generative or feeling function,”<sup>22</sup> but instead of her general application, it seems specific to Greta, evidenced by her self-hate: “She’s not a woman any more. She’s a joke. A dirty joke.”<sup>23</sup> This is the final scene before the climax of the (possibility of) dead rising, and it represents Greta’s full confession of her sexual past. She does not actually arrive at a form of self-actualization, but like all of McGuinness’s characters, she is led to the threshold of a safe space in which to cope with her personal pain.

Perhaps the most important male character after Dido is Hark, a.k.a. Johnny Harkin. He is the most dominant representative of the violent male culture of Northern Ireland (he was part of the IRA), and his journey throughout the play is guided and even directly confronted by Dido. It is through constant intervention by the "queen of Derry" that Hark accepts a more feminine direction in society, foregoing the masculine cult of "loyalty" and "betrayal." Hark was a "lookout man" for the IRA and was eventually arrested for his involvement. While in prison, he refused to take part in the hunger strikes, accepting the path of life over death. In the atmosphere of the Troubles, this was considered not accepting "masculine" responsibilities and therefore betrayal. Hark's attempt at counteracting this assignment to the feminine is a staged masculinity and ardent nationalism.

Hark is reluctant to accept Dido's generosity with the offering of sandwiches, and indeed erupts into belligerent homophobia; this is his reaction to the new feminine male: "You are known as a queer in this town. I do not like being seen with queers. I do not like queers. I do not like you. Fuck off."<sup>24</sup> This develops into a full confrontation in the second scene, as Hark reenacts his being "picked up" by the police upon Dido, interrogating his sexuality; he slaps Dido and rubs his groin and promises to let him go conditionally:

I'll let you go if you tell me. Tell me what's between your legs. Is there anything between your legs? Is there one between your legs? Is the united Ireland between your legs? What happens when cocks unite? Disease, boy, disease. The united Ireland's your disease. Does your cock want a united Ireland?<sup>25</sup>

In this assault on Dido, Hark is also assailing his own nationalism and masculinity. The association of the Protestant and Catholic sides with the phallus acknowledges that it is an entirely male construction. After this episode, he admits that "Johnny is

dead now and only Harkin remains;"<sup>26</sup> the feminine prisoner that submitted to hunger is dead and only the hollow shell of the masculine poser remains.

Just as Greta "enlists her masculinity in refusing to display the emotional,"<sup>27</sup> Hark utilizes pseudo-masculinity in repressing his femininity. Fully enmeshed within the realm of male cults, Hark will not admit the possibility of the dead rising, i.e., a vision of feminine peace and forgiveness. After an affected performance of "We Shall Overcome" (an allusion to the African-American struggle for civil rights), Hark overturns Martin Luther King, Jr.'s message of reconciliation in favor of a sermon designed to maintain partisan division: "Let us be like the asshole and let us be apart."<sup>28</sup> This "asshole" sermon serves as a complement to his interrogation of Dido; similar to the divided phalluses ("What happens when cocks unite?"), it is expressing a fervent homogender atmosphere, devoid of female (vaginal) fertility. While Hark is making this speech, Dido enters and is verbally assaulted; the "queen" responds by smashing sausages into Hark's chest and face.<sup>29</sup> This response literally throws the aggressive masculinity back in the face of its advocate.

Later in the play, Hark does begin to gravitate towards a more feminine ideal with generative possibilities by agreeing to consider having a child with Maela. Shortly after, Greta begins a masculine verbal assault on Seph, accusing him of the ultimate un-manly crime of the Troubles: traitor. He is gently led through his confession by Paul, with Hark remaining aloof. Then Seph states that he informed to save the living from becoming the dead, and Hark joins the attack: "You were a traitor. Nothing else. Who gives a damn if you live or die?" Seph counter-attacks and forces Hark to admit his own cowardice in not participating in the hunger strikes



or carrying a gun. Dido intervenes only once, and with a seemingly innocuous question in context: "Do you not eat at all, Hark?"<sup>30</sup> This returns the audience to the first scene, when Dido offered Hark sandwiches and was roughly rebuffed. Dido now realizes that his refusal was not simply a form of homophobia, but Hark's attempt to mask his vulnerable feminine past. Thus purged of his guilt, Hark can resurrect himself with the other living dead in the graveyard.

The conclusion of *Carthaginians* is very ambiguous, and the audience is not certain what has occurred. Each of the characters have exorcized his or her ghosts; Maela admits that her daughter is dead; Sarah confronts her past as a prostitute; Greta purges the spirit of her "dead brother"; Paul admits the trivial nature of his life in comparison of the atmosphere of bullets and bombs; Seph faces his past as an informant; and Hark confronts his "feminine" rejection of starvation. The penultimate scene involves all of the characters in a call-and-response of cleansing and forgiveness:

Hark: Forgive yourself  
Maela: Bury the dead.  
Greta: Raise the dead.  
Sarah: Wash the living.<sup>31</sup>

McGuinness does not didactically instruct us how the characters (and by consequence, Derry) reconcile the future course with the past. He has organized the conclusion to guide the *dramatis personae* and the audience in the direction of peace and feminine sensibilities. The goal is not a united Ireland, but recognition of and skepticism toward the divisions.

In the concluding scene, McGuinness reverses the role of Dido in Carthage, allowing him to invert the fate that was selected for Carthage and subtly plays upon

the names of the North African city and Derry. Derry means “dove,” or the bird of peace; Sarah has already buried the bird several scenes before, signifying the death of a peaceful city. However, Carthage means “new city,” which is clearly the direction that McGuinness is guiding us towards. Dido notes that “Carthage [though not Derry] has not been destroyed;”<sup>32</sup> power is transferred from colonizer to the colonized. Similar to the end of Heaney’s *The Cure at Troy* (written two years later), the conclusion of *Carthaginians* empowers the audience (or rather the audience of Northern Ireland) to direct fate: the choice is between continuing violence and destroying the “new city” or a recognition and reconciliation of differences. The solution lies not in the binary masculine bloodshed and arrogance of the Provisional IRA or radical Unionists, but in a more multi-lateral and empathetic feminine peace.

## II.

Ten years after the first production of *Carthaginians*, Frank McGuinness returned to classical tropes and methods with his version of Sophocles’s *Electra*. My analysis of *Electra* is not as extensive as *Carthaginians*, mainly because McGuinness does not severely alter the text (he streamlined it significantly, and modified the wording to make it sound like a McGuinness play) enough to qualify it as a wholly original work. Unlike Heaney, he does not add anachronistic images of police widows and hunger strikers to events that occurred two and a half millennia ago. What is relevant to this discussion is how *Electra* fits into the playwright’s gendered aesthetic while addressing the issue of tribal revenge.

The plot of *Electra* is quite simple: Electra is awaiting the return of her brother Orestes to revenge the murder of her father (Agamemnon) at the hands of their mother (Clytemnestra) and her lover (Aegisthus); a false report (sent by Orestes) arrives announcing the death of her brother; Orestes arrives in disguise, reveals his identity to his sister, and then proceeds to murder Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. It stands as one of the classic tales of vengeance and represents what McGuinness's director David Leveaux called an "attempt to find both speech and reason to confront the most fundamental moral struggles in the heart of civilization itself." Leveaux comments further upon what is actually the crux of McGuinness's purpose for the play: "it asks if justice devoid of forgiveness may really be considered 'just' at all."<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps what is most startling about this play is how it stands in marked contrast to *Carthaginians*. I've already mentioned that *Electra* applies the modern to the classics and *Carthaginians* reverses this, but that is not the only inversion. The earlier play is an exercise in positive example; the characters pass through public and private hardships and are implicitly edified by the process. *Electra* is a performance designed to instruct through negative reinforcement. An example of this contrast occurs in one of Orestes's opening speeches:

Words used to your advantage can't bring bad.  
I've heard of heroes in the past,  
They were presumed dead and when they rose again,  
The honour given to them was all the greater.<sup>34</sup>

The dilemma at the heart of *Carthaginians* is precisely that the dead cannot walk again, no matter how many dead we commit in the effort. Rather than the dramatis personae gravitating to a feminine solution, *Electra* is a tale of patriarchal bloodlust. Orestes almost echoes a theme in *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, that of fighting for the

“ancestral gods”<sup>35</sup> of his father: “My father’s gods. / For those same gods have hastened me here. / To scrub you clean of stain.”<sup>36</sup>

McGuinness’s mark on the language is noticeable throughout the play, and (like the examples above) at points he incorporates elements from his other works to guide us through this strictly gendered society. Electra’s difficulty is that she is a woman who wants to enact masculine revenge; she allows her sex to dominate in spite of what her masculine gender tells her. In despair, she gives way to feminine weeping and is chastised by the chorus:

Your father is dead.  
You can’t cry him back from his grave.  
Your prayers can’t raise him up again.  
You will die from all this grieving.

This is strikingly parallel to Maela of *Carthaginians*. At this censure, Electra allows her masculine need for revenge to emerge: “It’s a cruel child that forgets a father’s cruel end. / I’d sooner turn to stone and my tears into rivers.”<sup>37</sup> Throughout this scene and indeed the play, the chorus serves as a voice of reason that is largely ignored. The central question of the Troubles occurs early in the play: “Has it never dawned on you how much you make / your own misery?” Electra’s response evolves from classic partisan attitudes: “I know the hardness of my heart. / But as long as there is breath left in my body, / I will not change direction no matter how harmful.”<sup>38</sup> She then closes her course to masculine vengeance: “And those who did not pay the wages of their sin, / If they themselves are not murdered in return, / Then the gods are dead and there is no faith.”<sup>39</sup>

Electra eventually gets her wish; Orestes returns and slays their mother. However, the Chorus’s opinion notes that this is not a felicitous event: “The curse has

worked. / The dead live again, / Draining the blood of the living.”<sup>40</sup> This has obvious connections to *Carthaginians* and its central image of waiting for the dead to rise. However, what occurs in the former play is not the raising of the dead, but an intense focus on the zombie existence in the north and the redemption of the living dead. The solution lies not rotting with political martyrs in the ground, but within the seemingly pedestrian existence of ordinary people. In *Electra*, McGuinness broadcasts the same message from a reverse angle; rather than zombies, we are given the image of the dead as vampires “draining the blood of the living.” The perpetual resuscitation of the dead is a sterile and parasitic endeavor; nothing is generated in this atmosphere. The greater implication of this is tied to Aegisthus’s words as he is being led offstage to his execution, concluding the play: “Is this house forever cursed? Shall there be killing after killing forever?”<sup>41</sup> *Electra* does not end with the same message of “history and hope” that *The Cure at Troy* transmits; it interrogates the sustainability of a belligerent masculine society.

Also unlike *The Cure at Troy*, the resolution of *Electra* is disturbing with a strict consideration of the text or with a nod to post-modern sensibilities of an inherited tradition. Intratextually, the chorus and the audience are uncomfortable with the renewing of a murder cycle that has been dormant for twenty years.

Extratextually, this gains even greater force. Tradition indicates that this is only the pivot point in a series of murders (this comes from Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* trilogy, not Sophocles); before *Electra*, Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon in retribution for his sacrifice of Iphigenia to facilitate the beginning of the Trojan war; after *Electra*, Orestes is sent into flight from the Euminides (a.k.a. the Furies), who want to punish

him for his revenge murder. The retribution cycle is only ended by a *deus ex machina*, i.e., Orestes is rescued by Athena. This is what presents a problem in the modern climate of violence; the situation cannot be resolved by the intervention of a god (although both sides would like to believe it will be). The remedy for Northern Ireland is the same as it is for Electra; rather than embracing a sanguine and paternal tradition, we should gravitate to maternal discourses in the peace process. A satisfying conclusion will only happen if both sides unite under a more peaceful feminine principle.

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<sup>1</sup> Lojek, Helen Heusner. *Contexts for Frank McGuinness's Drama*. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 2004), 160.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 162

<sup>3</sup> Ratzinger, Joseph. "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the collaboration of men and women in the Church and the World."  
<http://www.zenit.org/english> 31 Jul 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Foley, Imelda. *The Girls in the Big Picture: Gender in Contemporary Ulster Theater*. (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 2003), 110.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>7</sup> Schneider, Ulrich. "Staging History in Contemporary Anglo-Irish Drama: Brian Friel and Frank McGuinness." *The Crows Behind the Plough: History and Violence in Anglo-Irish Poetry and Drama*. Ed. Geert Lernout. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991), 89.

<sup>8</sup> McGuinness quoted in Foley. *Big Picture*, 117.

<sup>9</sup> Foley. *Big Picture*, 117.

<sup>10</sup> McGuinness, Frank. *Carthaginians and Baglady*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 57.

<sup>11</sup> Foley. *Big Picture*, 122.

<sup>12</sup> Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Tendencies*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 157.

<sup>13</sup> *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 3rd Ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1980), 264.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>15</sup> McGuinness. *Carthaginians*, 47.

<sup>16</sup> Many thanks to Dr. Ed Madden for pointing out the connection between Greta and Gretta. See Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. (New York: Signet, 1991), 231.

<sup>17</sup> McGuinness. *Carthaginians*, 4.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>19</sup> *DSM*, 265.

<sup>20</sup> McGuinness. *Carthaginians*, 47.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>22</sup> Kelly-O'Reilly, Anne F. "Carthaginians: Narratives of Death and Resurrection in a Derry Graveyard." *The Theater of Frank McGuinness: Stages of Mutability*. (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2002), 95.

<sup>23</sup> McGuinness. *Carthaginians*, 63.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>27</sup> Foley. *Big Picture*, 124.

<sup>28</sup> McGuinness. *Carthaginians*, 26.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>33</sup> McGuinness, Frank. *Electra*. By Sophocles. (New York: Stage and Screen, 1998), v-vi.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>35</sup> McGuinness, Frank. *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 45.

<sup>36</sup> McGuinness. *Electra*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 8.



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<sup>39</sup> McGuinness. *Electra*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 70.

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